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EDUCATION, ENGAGEMENT AND DECOLONISATION IN MUSEUMS:
THE CASE OF THE NOSSO SAGRADO COLLECTION

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the educational and transformative potential of the *Nosso Sagrado* collection, an important example of Afro-Brazilian heritage at the *Museu da República*, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, it employs a qualitative case study with semi-structured interviews, fieldwork, and a literature and theoretical framework review.

Reflexive thematic analysis explored the collection's role in cultural accessibility, education, and the decolonisation of museum practices. Findings reveal its symbolic and political significance for Afro-Brazilian communities, persistent challenges, and the need for inclusive, community-led strategies. The study positions contested heritage as a catalyst for dialogue, reflection, and social change.

Keywords: Nosso Sagrado; Engagement; Education; Decolonisation; Museums.

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LIST OF TERMS

Babalorixás and Ialorixás - Male (*Babalorixá*) or female (*Ialorixá*) are spiritual leaders of a Candomblé *terreiro*. They guide rituals, provide spiritual instruction, and oversee the community.

Caboclos - Spiritual entities representing Indigenous ancestors or spirits, associated with strength, healing, and connection to nature. Central to *Umbanda* practices.

Casa de Santo - Refers to the religious community and the physical space where rituals take place. Used in both *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*, emphasising the communal aspect.

Terreiro - Sacred space where rituals, offerings, and ceremonies are performed. Often emphasises the physical site, used in both *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*.

Fio de Contas - Beaded necklaces worn as symbols of initiation, spiritual protection, and connection to specific Orixás. Central to *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*.

Orixás - Deities or spiritual entities associated with natural forces and aspects of human life. Worshipped in *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*.

Pretos-velhos - Spiritual entities representing wise ancestors of African descent, offering guidance, healing, and protection. Central to *Umbanda* practices.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ENEM - *Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* / Exam used for university admissions and educational assessment

ICOM - International Council of Museums

IPHAN - *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional* / National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage

UNIRIO - *Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro* / Federal University of the Rio de Janeiro's State

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of museums in shaping historical narratives and cultural memory has long been contested, particularly in the context of colonial legacies and their impact on marginalised communities. In recent years, movements advocating for decolonisation and restitution have gained significant traction, raising critical discussions about the museum's role, practices, representation and accessibility. Within this debate, the *Nosso Sagrado* collection stands as a powerful case study of contested heritage, reflecting Afro-Brazilian resilience in the struggles against systemic racism, coloniality and religious intolerance.

The *Nosso Sagrado* collection comprises 519 sacred objects from Afro-Brazilian religious traditions (*Candomblé* and *Umbanda*), seized by the police in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, between 1890 and 1946. These objects, once criminalised and displayed under the discriminatory label of “Black Magic” in the city’s Police Museum since 1945, were transferred in 2020 to the *Museu da República* (Republic Museum) as a result of a community-led movement, *Liberte Nosso Sagrado*, that started in 2017 (Alves, 2021; Maggie and Rafael, 2013; Pereira, 2017). Currently, the collection is under a shared-management agreement between the museum and representatives from *Candomblé* and *Umbanda* religions (Oxum *et al*, 2021). Despite this milestone, since the moment of its transfer to the new museum, the collection remains in storage and offers limited access to the public, raising questions about its current and future role in museum education, community engagement, and the development of decolonial practices. This research aims to examine the collection's potential to foster engagement and critical reflection, addressing both decolonisation and contemporary issues, while aligning with the needs and perspectives of the community involved.

Candomblé and *Umbanda* are Afro-Brazilian religions deeply rooted in the historical and cultural context of Brazil, particularly in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Both have emerged as

resilient expressions of African-descendant communities, shaped by histories of displacement, resistance, and syncretism (Boaz, 2021). Candomblé is centred on the veneration of *orixás*, spiritual entities that connect humans to the divine and to forces of nature. Its rituals involve dance, music, offerings, and the transmission of knowledge through oral and embodied practices, organised in *terreiros* led by religious leaders (*babalorixás* or *ialorixás*). Each *terreiro* functions as a sacred space of continuity, memory, and spiritual belonging (Boaz, 2021, p. 13). Umbanda, which originated in Rio de Janeiro in the early 20th century, integrates elements of Kardecist Spiritism, Catholicism, Indigenous traditions, and African cosmologies (Boaz, 2021, p. 13). While it also recognises the *orixás*, Umbanda is particularly known for its communication with entities such as *pretos-velhos* (elder Black spirits referring to the formerly enslaved), *caboclos* (spirits of Indigenous ancestry), and *crianças* (children), who offer advice and healing during ceremonies (Boaz, 2021, p. 14). These spirits are believed to help the living as part of their own spiritual evolution (Boaz, 2021).

Although challenging, translating *Nosso Sagrado* into English is important as a means to communicate with English-speaking audiences. I believe *The Sacred Within Us*¹ best conveys its significance for the community, reflecting both its religious and cultural meaning, though *Our Sacred* and *Our Holy* are also commonly used in English articles (Hollenbach, 2017; Silva, 2022; Russi, 2022). Notably, the use of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ in both translations, as well as in the phrase ‘within us’, reflects how this heritage is deeply embedded in the community’s identity and worldview, as will be further discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.1. Since most of the sources cited in this work were originally developed in Brazilian Portuguese, and as a native Portuguese speaker, I have translated them myself, prioritising accuracy over literal equivalence to preserve their meaning.

¹ Translation first seen on the documentary *Nosso Sagrado*, by *Quiprocó Filmes* (Barbosa, G.; Santana, J. & Sousa, F., 2017).

My interest in the Nosso Sagrado case emerged after my first visit to Rio de Janeiro, including a full day out at the Museu da República in March 2023, where I engaged with the site, its gardens, and ongoing public programming. At that time, the Nosso Sagrado collection had already been transferred to the Museu da República; however, I was unaware of its history or presence within the museum, as it was not on display and no related information was provided to visitors. It was later, during the third semester of the Edumah programme while writing a paper for the Contested Heritage course at the University of Malta, that the collection emerged as a potential case study for this dissertation. Drawing from my academic background in History and prior research on African and Afro-Brazilian heritage during my undergraduate studies, as well as reflecting on my future as a museum educator, I became increasingly motivated to investigate how museum practices can be transformed through community participation and anti-racist education within this context. More recently, in the context of this research, I established contact with the Museu da República, engaging in a series of conversations with professionals that contributed to shaping my research focus and deepened my interest in the relationship between museums, communities, and contested heritage.

1.1. Problem Statement

Existing literature on the Nosso Sagrado collection has shed important light on its historical and political significance, especially regarding its formation, the social movements that fought for its return, and broader debates on repatriation (Alves, 2021; Maggie, 2013; Oxum *et al*, 2021; Pereira, 2017). These contributions are essential to understanding the trajectory of the collection and the forms of violence it embodies. However, less attention has been paid to its potential within the museum context, particularly in relation to education, cultural accessibility, and community engagement following its recent transfer to the Museu da República.

This dissertation addresses this gap by exploring how the collection can be integrated into the museum’s educational and participatory practices, and how it can serve as a powerful tool for confronting religious racism and fostering broader societal change. Through in-depth interviews, it examines how practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions in Rio de Janeiro relate to the collection today, particularly in terms of memory, identity, representation, access, and future uses. Understanding these perspectives is essential for identifying existing barriers and opportunities for more inclusive and community-led museum practices.

The research is grounded in a broader context in which museums are being called to act not only as sites of preservation and display, but also as spaces of transformation, learning, and historical accountability (Brown & Mairesse, 2018). In Brazil, this shift is particularly urgent given the country’s colonial legacies and persistent racial and social inequalities. The case of *Nosso Sagrado* and the shared management model now in place at the Museu da República offers a valuable opportunity to reflect on these changes.

1.2. Justification and Purpose

As African heritage gains increasing recognition in Brazil, new forms of public awareness have emerged across multiple spheres of society. For instance, since 2003, Law 10.639/2003 has made the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture mandatory in all primary and secondary schools; this requirement was later extended to include Indigenous culture as well through Law 11.645/2008 (Unesco, n.d.). More recently, the ENEM² 2024 essay theme, “Challenges for the valorisation of African heritage in Brazil”, led over 4.3 million students to reflect on African heritage (Agencia Brasil, 2024). In the realm of cultural policy, the *passinho* dance style, rooted in Rio’s favelas, was listed as intangible cultural heritage by the Municipal

² ENEM (Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio) is Brazil’s national high school exam, used for university admissions and educational assessment (Ministerio da Educacao, n.d).

Council in 2024 (Carneiro & Rodrigues, 2024). Additionally, celebrations such as Black Awareness Day (November 20th) and Rio's Day of Candomblé and Umbanda (March 30th) highlight official recognition of Afro-Brazilian religions. Lastly, institutional efforts such as those of the *Museu Afro Brasil*, with its long-standing commitment to preserving Black culture, as well as the transference of the *Nosso Sagrado* collection to Museu da República, highlight a growing interest in reframing historical narratives and promoting cultural justice.

However, this growing recognition coexists with continued and alarming levels of racism and discrimination. Cases of religious intolerance directed at Afro-Brazilian belief systems continue to rise, with a 64.5% increase in police reports between 2022 and 2023 (Fantástico, 2024). Research on such an urgent and sensitive issue is particularly relevant, not only for contributing to broader debates on racism and religious prejudice but also for reflecting on the museums' role in addressing historical conflicts and inequalities.

This research holds significance for both the museum and the community involved, considering that the main objective is to explore how a museum collection of sacred Afro-Brazilian objects can address contemporary issues such as racism and religious prejudice while fostering community engagement, access and awareness, having a primary focus on the community's perspectives and wishes. Furthermore, this thesis can potentially contribute to other museums and cultural institutions that aim to incorporate and empower voices often marginalised and excluded from such spaces and which can lead to raising consciousness and social change.

1.3. Research Questions

The main research questions guiding this study are:

1. What is the collection's role in promoting cultural accessibility, fostering critical thinking, and contributing to social change?

2. How can the communities' perspectives inform more inclusive strategies for engaging with and using the Nosso Sagrado collection for educational purposes?
3. How and in what ways can engagement with the collection contribute to combating racism and religious prejudice in connection with the community's interpretations?

These questions are addressed through a qualitative approach grounded in in-depth interviews with members of the Afro-Brazilian religious community living in Rio de Janeiro, combined with fieldwork observation and informal conversations with museum professionals at the Museu da República.

1.4. Organisation of Paper

This dissertation is organised into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research context, objectives, and guiding questions. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology, including research design, scope, assumptions and limitations, as well as data collection and analysis strategies. Chapter 3 focuses on a review of relevant literature and theoretical framework, covering the social history of the Nosso Sagrado collection and key theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Chapter 4 details the study's findings by conducting a thematic analysis of the interviews, interpreting participants' input in relation to the research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the thesis with final thoughts and other perspectives drawn throughout this work.

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted in this research. It begins by presenting the overall research design and the paradigm that underpins the study, followed by a description of the data collection and analysis processes. Ethical considerations are discussed in connection to the research context, along with the assumptions and limitations that may have influenced the study. The chapter aims to provide a transparent and critical account of the methodological choices made, justifying them in relation to the research objectives and results.

2.1. Research Design

This research is grounded in qualitative methodology, focusing on the *Nosso Sagrado* collection at the Museu da República as a case study. As Leavy (2017, p. 9) explains, qualitative research is well suited to exploring the meanings people ascribe to events, artefacts, and situations, with an emphasis on subjective experience and in-depth understanding. This aligns with the aims of this study, which primarily seeks to investigate how Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners interpret and relate to the collection, and how these perspectives can inform more inclusive, community-oriented museum practices.

A case study approach was chosen as this allows for a detailed, situated understanding of a phenomenon. As Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012, p. 13) note, case study research provides insight into the inner workings of particular examples rather than aiming for generalisations. Yet, this case study can, simultaneously, inform more participative practices within its own context and, at a broader level, for other museums with politically engaged agendas. This study applies reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2021) to interpret the qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews, field notes and ongoing conversations with museum

professionals and community members. Reflexive thematic analysis is a flexible method that allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns of meaning, in other words, the development of themes, within a dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 5). As argued by Braun and Clarke (2021), this model is based on the assumption that meaning is not inherent in the data but constructed through the researcher's lens, and so it recognises the active role of the researcher and the need for ongoing reflexivity.

2.2. Research paradigm

According to Leavy (2017, p. 11), a research paradigm is a foundational perspective, a worldview that carries a set of assumptions and guides the research process. This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which is characterised by a concern for the individual (Cohen *et al*, 2018). Interpretive research focuses on “people’s subjective experiences, which are grounded in social-historical contexts” (Leavy, 2017, p. 13). This worldview underpins the study’s commitment to exploring how Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners make sense of a symbolic collection in their sociocultural context, within the broader context of cultural resistance, marginalisation, and heritage representation.

Rather than attempting to produce generalisable findings, this research seeks to understand how participants interpret their experiences in relation to a museum collection and its current institutional framing. It aims to provide valuable insights capable of amplifying underrepresented voices and contributing to decolonial and inclusive practices. As such, the interpretivist paradigm is aligned with the study’s intention to privilege lived experience, subjectivity, and context-specific meaning-making over universal claims (Cohen *et al*, 2018). As Leavy (2017) explains, interpretivism is grounded in the belief that reality is constructed through human interaction with the world, and that truth is multiple and contradictory, often referred to as

the social construction of reality.

In this paradigm, data are viewed as emerging from the researcher's interaction with participants. As Cohen *et al* (2018) state, “in interpretive research, theory is emergent and arises from participant situations; it is grounded in data generated by the researcher.” Accordingly, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method for collecting data, as they enable in-depth exploration of participants’ subjective experiences while maintaining space for the co-construction of meaning. These interviews were designed to evoke individual reflections, perceptions, and aspirations regarding the Nosso Sagrado collection, particularly from practitioners not directly involved in its institutional management. This approach supports the generation of nuanced insights grounded in participants’ everyday realities, rather than pre-defined theoretical assumptions.

2.3. Data collection

The dataset to be created throughout this master thesis consists of a combination of semi-structured interviews with community members, fieldwork observations, informal conversations with museum professionals, and a review of literature and theoretical frameworks, all together shaping the scope of the research and aiming to respond to the research questions guiding this exploration.

2.3.1. Semi-structured interviews

The primary form of data collection for this case study consists of five remote semi-structured interviews with Candomblé and Umbanda religious practitioners, aged between 25 to 40 years old, who are from and based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Participants follow different spiritual trajectories within their respective religions, with some having been involved for many

years and others being relatively new to their religious paths. Participants' profiles will be further explored in Chapter 4, as this is essential information for the analysis and results.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method for their ability to explore participants' perspectives in depth, while also maintaining a flexible structure that allows for emerging topics. In line with Seidman's (2019) understanding of qualitative interviewing, this research is grounded in an interest in people's lived experiences and the meanings they make of those experiences. Seidman (2019, p. 21) argues that "telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process" (p. 21), and that recounting narratives is a fundamental way in which humans have historically made sense of their realities. Within this framework, interviewing becomes a basic mode of inquiry, which is particularly valuable when the goal is to understand how individuals relate to culturally and politically charged heritage, such as the *Nosso Sagrado* collection.

The interviews were designed using open-ended questions, allowing for flexibility and the co-construction of meaning through dialogue. Rather than seeking factual responses alone, the aim was to elicit participants' reflections, memories, and interpretations, guided by their personal, cultural, and spiritual experiences. Moreover, the emphasis on voice, narrative, and relationality also reflects the study's decolonial commitment to amplifying community perspectives that are historically marginalised in institutional heritage narratives. This focus on community voices was intentional and sufficient for the scope of this study, as the research questions centred on the experiences of practitioners who are not necessarily involved with the institutional care and shared agreement of *Nosso Sagrado*, yet are directly affected by how this collection is represented, preserved, and made accessible. Their participation provided rich and nuanced responses, offering both critical reflections and valuable insights for future actions.

Additionally, while reviewing the literature on the *Nosso Sagrado* case, a recurring pattern emerged regarding data collection and analysis: interviews were primarily conducted with

members of the working group representing the religious community within the shared management model established in partnership with the Museu da República. This study, therefore, brings an original contribution by generating new empirical data that explores how broader Afro-Brazilian communities in Rio de Janeiro perceive and engage with the museum and, more specifically, the *Nosso Sagrado* collection.

Community members were initially recruited through a gatekeeper within a local and representative place of worship in Rio. This connection was established early in the research process while building a research network for guidance and seeking ethical approval and access to participants. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used, as initial participants expressed interest in the study and referred others within their networks who met the criteria and wished to participate voluntarily. Throughout the recruitment process, care was taken to ensure that participation was informed, voluntary, and respectful of cultural protocols and participants' autonomy.

2.3.2. Fieldwork and on-site observation

As previously indicated, I had already experienced the Museu da República as a visitor in 2023. After contact with the museum was established for collaboration in my research, a visit to the museum storage and subsequent conversation with museum professionals was scheduled for March 24th, 2025. On that occasion, the museum palace was closed for renovations³, whereas the gardens were naturally open to the public and administrative buildings were still running internal operations. It is important to acknowledge that the opportunity to visit the storage and engage with museum staff was both personally and professionally meaningful and, as a master's student, I recognise the privileged position of having access to a collection that is not currently on public

³ This information was made public by the end of January 2025, both on the museum website and socialmedia, and the timeframe established for the renovation was February 1st to May 1st (Museu da República, 2025b). Considering the research timeframe and the museum agenda, my fieldwork was planned accordingly for the month of March. The museum was officially reopened on 16th July 2025 (Museu da República, 2025a)

display, even though questions concerning its accessibility and awareness are central to this thesis.

Data emerged from field notes, pictures taken for reference and informal conversations with museum professionals. When the visit was scheduled, the gatekeeper at the museum also organised a meeting with museum professionals and partners. Present that day were the museologist responsible for the museum's storage management, the museum historian and researcher who works directly with the collection, the former museum director who was in charge when the collection was transferred to the Museu da República, a partner professor and researcher, and a local PhD student who is also conducting research about the *Nosso Sagrado* collection and who identifies themselves as part of the religious community. On that occasion, I had the opportunity to engage in conversations about the collection's history, current state and future perspectives, as well as to see the entire museum storage and all the artefacts that compose the collection.

Guiding my observation and reflection was Lindauer's (2006) work "The Critical Museum Visitor", which invites visitors to actively decode the museum as a text, encouraging the readers to analyse architectural design, display styles, written materials, questioning assumptions and identifying stated and unstated messages and goals. More importantly, Lindauer (2006) encourages visitors to reflect on their own experience, expectations and role within a museum. Adopting a critical visitor approach was essential to guide my visit and attention to details (Lindauer, 2006; Moser, 2010), focusing on recording aspects of museum storage, condition of the collection artefacts, organisation of space and written messages throughout. Following the visit, I walked around the gardens observing how people were occupying the space, and I found myself a spot where I could go through my notes and photos and organise my records, identifying main topics of discussion, activities done during the visit, such as watching the *Respeita Nosso Sagrado*

documentary (Barbosa and Sousa, 2020)⁴, and my emotional response to the day. All aspects of the visit form relevant data about management, storage and research, to be later incorporated in the analysis chapter.

2.4. Data analysis

Considering that this study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and that the primary source of data collection consists of semi-structured interviews with community members, an inductive approach to data analysis will be adopted. Rather than applying pre-existing theoretical frameworks, the analysis will be guided by the data itself, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives. The analysis followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2021), which emphasises the researcher's active role in interpreting meaning and constructing themes through engagement with the data collected. Additionally, as argued by Yin (2018), this approach enables the use of converging evidence from multiple sources, thereby enhancing the depth and validity of the analysis. In this study, such sources include interview transcripts, ongoing conversations, field notes, photographs, and additional institutional materials.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2021, p. 35-36) six-phase model of reflexive thematic analysis, I began by immersing myself in the data through repeated readings of the interview transcripts and field notes. The material was then coded using NVivo, a qualitative research software that supports systematic and secure data management. From these initial codes, broader analytical themes were developed, reviewed, and refined in an interactive process that remained attentive to coherence and relevance. The themes presented in Chapter 5 reflect the central topics

⁴ *Respeita Nosso Sagrado* is a short film directed by Barbosa and Sousa (2020) at Quiprocó Filmes, focusing on the collection's transference process from the Police Museum to the Museu da República. Up to the point where this master thesis is being written, this film could not be found available on online platforms or streaming.

of discussion, recurring concerns, values, and perspectives shared by the interviewees in relation to the Nosso Sagrado collection and its broader sociocultural context.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Ensuring ethical integrity is fundamental to all stages of this research, particularly given its focus on underrepresented communities and culturally sensitive heritage. As Leavy (2017, p. 11) argues, ethics is central to social research practice and must be considered alongside values and reflexivity as one of the three core components that guide research design and implementation. This study adheres to the University of Malta's Research Code of Practice and Ethics, and ethical approval for conducting interviews was formally granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) on May 13th 2025, following a two-month review procedure (Appendix A).

Beyond formal procedures such as informed consent, pseudonymisation, and the right to withdraw participation, other ethical concerns in this research emerged more clearly during the process of fieldwork and analysis. Several participants mentioned the location and names of their places of worship, sometimes referring to other individuals within their communities, which raised questions about how to protect all identities that were intertwined with the narratives shared and could be affected by my work. Gaining access to the field through a gatekeeper also required careful reflection on how this mediated dynamic could shape participants' responses or reflections during the interviews. As someone positioned outside the religious traditions being discussed, I was continuously aware of the need to approach the narratives with humility, attention, and care, especially given their spiritual and political depth. Many of the accounts shared with me carried significant emotional weight and moments of powerful testimony, which often made me question how to do justice to what was said without reducing its complexity through academic language. Rather than following a static ethical framework, I approached the research as a continuous

process of reflection, listening, and accountability – one that required me to remain attentive to my role as a researcher shaping how these voices are represented within this context, and to the broader histories of marginalisation they speak against.

2.6. Assumptions and limitations

Like any qualitative case study, this research is shaped by practical, methodological, and contextual factors that both frame and limit its scope. One important limitation concerns the process of establishing contact with the museum where the collection is currently housed. Although communication was eventually successful, leading to a visit to the storage space and consistent support from a key staff member throughout the development of this thesis, initial attempts to reach the institution via official channels went unanswered. This delayed early engagement with museum professionals and the community workgroup, consequently, influenced the decision to focus interviews primarily on participants not directly involved in the shared management process. The experience also reflects broader institutional challenges around accessibility and communication, which are themselves relevant to the study's themes of representation and inclusion.

Additionally, all interviews were conducted remotely. While remote interviews allow flexibility and broader geographic reach, they may also limit the depth of engagement with participants and the observation of non-verbal clues. Additionally, the museum's palace was temporarily closed for restoration during my visit, limiting the opportunities for observation of visitor experiences in the gardens in the museum surroundings. Observational data, therefore, relies on a combination of the 2025 visit to the storage space and previous leisure experience in 2023.

This research is also shaped by several assumptions. While the Nosso Sagrado collection is well known within academic and museological contexts in Brazil, it has remained largely stored

and minimally displayed in recent decades. Based on this, there is the assumption that not all members of Afro-Brazilian religious communities residing in Rio are aware of the collection's existence. This is compounded by the historical marginalisation of these communities, including their physical and symbolic exclusion from cultural spaces such as museums. As such, it was also assumed that many participants would not consider museums central to their identity formation or tools for anti-racism and representation, which influences their engagement with the research topic.

Another assumption guiding the study is that the current management and outreach related to the *Nosso Sagrado* collection appear to be concentrated within a relatively small network, mainly involving the *Liberte Nosso Sagrado* campaign participants (see Chapter 3.1.1) and a core group of community representatives from Rio de Janeiro. This was based on early observations, recurring names and narratives, and the institutional dissemination of information. Considering that the collection is currently not widely accessible, its history of neglect and participants' lived experience, such an assumption was confirmed. In response, this study aims to offer insights into how awareness and participation around the collection might be broadened. Additionally, because this is a Brazilian case study conducted in Portuguese and presented in English, the research involves ongoing translation of interviews and contextual material. Every effort was made to ensure accurate and respectful translations; however, some meanings, idioms, or cultural nuances may still not be fully conveyed.

Finally, as a historian with prior academic engagement in African and Afro-Brazilian heritage, having developed my undergraduate thesis on the topic as well as participated in diverse research-related groups, my background and intellectual training inevitably shape how I approach this study. While this positioning allows me to approach the *Nosso Sagrado* collection with contextual understanding and respect, I also recognise that it may incline me to align more closely with community perspectives and interpret the material in ways that reflect my own values and

prior commitments. This awareness requires reflexivity throughout the research process, particularly in how interviews are interpreted, how themes are constructed, and how conclusions are drawn. My aim is to remain critically engaged throughout the study, cross-checking data and available resources, while also using my positionality as a tool to foster deeper, more culturally grounded analysis.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This chapter introduces the contextual and theoretical foundations of the study, aiming to provide context for the readers to familiarise themselves with the diverse and layered context surrounding the research, as well as the significance of this powerful Afro-Brazilian collection. It begins by exploring the social history of the Nosso Sagrado collection, tracing its trajectory from the circumstances in which it was formed to its recent transfer to the Museu da República. In this part, different perspectives are brought together, and special attention is given to research and other works by members of the religious communities, such as Alves (2021), Pereira (2017), and co-writers Oxum and Iansã (Oxum *et al*, 2021). The second section engages with critical debates around contested heritage and the decolonisation of museums, framing the collection within broader struggles for historical justice and representational agency. The final section presents key theoretical perspectives on education and engagement in museum spaces, particularly in relation to marginalised communities and transformative practices.

3.1. Nosso Sagrado Social Life

In Rio de Janeiro, between 1890 and 1946, hundreds of sacred Afro-Brazilian objects from Candomblé and Umbanda religions were seized from traditional places of worship and treated as criminal evidence. Today, these same objects form the Nosso Sagrado collection, a powerful symbol for Afro-Brazilian heritage, currently housed in the Museu da República in Rio under a collaborative management agreement with the religious community. The collection consists of a diverse range of objects, such as sacred sculptures and figures, ceremonial garments, musical instruments, clothes, *fios-de-contas*, and many other items with religious significance to the communities they belong to (Maggie and Rafael, 2013, p. 288-289).

Figure 1: Four Items of the Collection



Note. Image compilation created by the author using photos from *Nosso Sagrado*, *Google Arts & Culture*, Museu da República. Available at: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/mwWx9m6ZCuqk5A?hl=pt-BR>

The history of this collection, however, is not a linear one. It moves through aspects of repression, contestation, and resistance. It makes sense, therefore, to think about this collection within a broader analytic framework of material culture, particularly “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process” by Kopytoff (1986). The author suggests that, like people, objects can be analysed through their biographies, revealing their historicity and agency throughout their social lives. Tracing these biographies reveals unique personal and social meanings (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 67). In his words: “A culturally informed economic biography of an object views it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with specific meanings, and classified and reclassified within culturally constituted categories” (1986, p. 68).

Similarly, Meneses (2002) argues that the social circuit of objects and other visual supports, i.e. the places and media through which they travelled, reveals multiple dimensions of the society itself, including aspects of culture, religion, meanings attributed to it, conveyed

narratives, and so on. In the specific case of *Nosso Sagrado*, Maggie and Rafael (2013, p. 280) argue that the life of an object derives mainly from the meanings attributed to them, which is susceptible to changes over time. Existing literature about the *Nosso Sagrado* case also tend to use this framework within their research (Alves, 2021; Pereira, 2017; Maggie and Rafael, 2013), arguing that reflecting on the biography of the objects that form the collection brings forth various aspects to the debate, such as contexts, ownership, politics, and many others that emerged during the research analysis (Chapter 4).

What is now a museum collection consisting of 519 objects from Afro-Brazilian religious communities started to be formed in the early years of Brazil's Republican period. After the fall of the Monarchy in 1889, the Republican government emerged and, although promising to enlarge democracy, remained dominated by the agrarian and political elites who had maintained power since the Imperial period (Alves, 2021). According to Monteiro (2006, p. 51), the emergence of the Brazilian republican state was marked by the introduction of penal and eugenics laws designed to control and discipline the public sphere and enforce a vision of a modern order with inspiration from European models. Monteiro (2006, p. 51) argues that the new Republic aimed to shape a unified civil society by disciplining the bodies and beliefs of Black and Indigenous populations, often portraying them as morally and culturally inferior.

Additionally, the Republican project that took shape from the 1890s onward was grounded in an ideology of racial whitening in Brazil, which was implemented in two primary ways: by encouraging European immigration to gradually reshape the race of the population and by enforcing a cultural process that aimed to erase non-white contributions from dominant narratives of national identity (Brasil, 2024; Hicks, 2020). This project, therefore, sought to erase slavery history and African heritage from Brazilian history

In the process of secularisation of the Brazilian state that began with the Republican period (Pereira, 2017, p. 28), Afro-Brazilian religious beliefs were not only marginalised but also

actively criminalised. Only two years after slavery was officially abolished (1888), the Republicans established the 1890 Penal Code, containing three articles (156, 157 and 158)⁵ referring to the “illegal practice of medicine, the practice of magic, and banning faith healing.” (Maggie & Rafael, 2013, p. 281). Monteiro (2006, p. 51) indicates that it is within this context that Police forces were mobilised to invade both public and private spaces, confiscate sacred objects, and classify entire belief systems as criminal threats to the moral order. Within this framework, as argued by Monteiro (2006, p. 51), the development of religious practices, particularly Afro-Brazilian religions, was deeply shaped by these regulatory mechanisms.

Although *Nosso Sagrado* is not the only collection of sacred objects assembled during a period of repression against Afro-Brazilian religions⁶, its formation reflects particular conditions. As Maggie and Rafael (2013, p. 296) argue, institutionalised repression during the early Republican period had uneven effects across the country, tending to more directly impact communities located near centres of political power. This was especially the case in cities like Rio de Janeiro, where the legal and administrative apparatus of the state was concentrated, and where Afro-Brazilian religious spaces such as *terreiros* were more exposed to surveillance and intervention (Maggie and Rafael, p. 296).

Drawing on the work of Maggie and Rafael (2013) and Maggie (1992), it becomes clear that the repression of Afro-Brazilian religions was not a neutral legal process, but rather a racialised system that disproportionately targeted Black and Indigenous communities. According to Maggie and Rafael (2013, p. 281), the regulatory mechanisms used to criminalise practices associated with Afro-Brazilian worship spaces have roots in the colonial period and were shaped

⁵ The 1890 Penal Code can be accessed in its original format at <https://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/decret/1824-1899/decreto-847-11-outubro-1890-503086-publicacaooriginal-1-pe.html> (Last accessed 15/04/2025).

⁶ Other collections of sacred Afro-Brazilian objects were assembled under the same legal and regulatory framework in Brazil. Notable examples include the *Estácio de Lima* Collection, currently housed at the *Museu Afro-Brasileiro* (MAFRO) of the Federal University of Bahia (*Universidade Federal da Bahia - UFBA*) (Alves, 2021, p. 31), and the *Perseverança* Collection, currently at the *Instituto Histórico e Geográfico de Alagoas* (IHGAL) in Maceió (Maggie & Rafael, 2013).

by longstanding racist stereotypes. In her earlier work, Maggie (1994) analyses police reports of religious crimes under the 1890 Penal Code, demonstrating that the persecution of mediumistic religions was not evenly applied. Instead, repression was directed at those accused of practising “evil magic” or “black magic”, aligned with dominant ideas of morality and scientific progress. As argued by Maggie and Rafael (2013, p. 283): “Rather, the law made it necessary to distinguish between good and bad magic, or between black magic and white magic to use the words of the terreiros themselves.”

Seized as proof of crimes, these objects were then kept under what Maggie and Rafael (2013) name *Institutional Tutelage*, meaning the Civil Police's control and the limitations of its storage systems. According to Alves (2021, p. 12), the Civil Police was considered by the Brazilian state to be one of the key institutions in the ideological path to progress and modernisation during the early Republican period. As part of this modernising agenda, reforms were introduced to improve the Police institution itself, leading to the creation of the Police School in 1912 for the training of new officers, and the Rio de Janeiro Civil Police Museum⁷ (*Museu da Polícia Civil do Rio de Janeiro*, from now on referred to as Police Museum), designed to house objects confiscated during Police raids in Candomblé and Umbanda places of worship (Alves, 2021, p. 13). The Police Museum, however, also served as an educational tool assisting the Police School, visually educating new police officers on what constituted a crime and, therefore, what should be prosecuted (Alves, 2021; Maggie and Rafael, 2013; Pereira, 2017; Oxum *et al*, 2021). According to Oxum *et al* (2021, p 78), objects from *Nosso Sagrado* were used in the reconstruction of crime scenes for practical classes, embedded within an authoritarian and racist pedagogical framework.

⁷ According to Pereira (2017, p. 33), the museum created by the Police Force was initially named the Museum of the Federal Department of Public Security of the Civil Police (*Museu do Departamento Federal de Segurança Pública da Polícia Civil*). In 1954, it was renamed the Rio de Janeiro Civil Police Museum (*Museu da Polícia Civil do Rio de Janeiro*). In this sense, the name Police Museum is used throughout the dissertation to ensure consistency and make it more accessible to English-speaking readers.

According to Alves (2021), the 1930s marked an important moment in the history of the Nosso Sagrado collection. The first reason is that, with the beginning of the Getúlio Vargas government⁸, the Police Museum began to take shape as an institution designated not only for storing objects but also for safekeeping and exhibiting its collections. The second reason is that, in 1938, a considerable part of the Nosso Sagrado collection became the first ethnographic item registered in the Book of Archaeological, Ethnographic, and Landscape Heritage of the National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage, from now on referred to as Iphan (Iphan, 2023)⁹. It was also with the heritage listing that Nosso Sagrado was officially labelled “Black Magic Collection”, an esterotypical name that was widely used until it was officially changed in 2023 (Iphan, 2023).

Regarding the official heritage listing, Alves (2021) argues that it not only attributed national value to the collection, establishing specific safeguarding measures for it, but it also became a key argument used by different stakeholders in the ongoing dispute over the collection, either advocating for the collection's restitution or its continued presence at the Police Museum. On another note, Maggie and Rafael (2013) argue that the belief in the efficacy of magic was shared among the Republican society and that the listing is a clear demonstration of the significance of these objects for “the policemen, who investigated the terreiros and impounded their ritual objects, the judges and prosecutors, who tried the cases, as well as the intellectuals who founded the heritage preservation institutions.” (Maggie and Rafael, 2013, p. 291).

⁸ Getúlio Vargas (1882-1954) was a dominant figure in Brazilian politics who came to power in 1930 through a coup that ended the First Republic. He ruled as a provisional leader, then as dictator under the authoritarian *Estado Novo* regime (1937-1945), and later as an elected president (1951–1954). His first period in power was marked by strong centralization of the state, the creation of new bureaucratic institutions, and increased control over cultural and religious expressions (Alves, 2021).

⁹ IPHAN, the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (*Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional*), is a federal agency founded in 1937 in Brazil responsible for preserving, protecting, and promoting the country's cultural heritage. At the time when part of Nosso Sagrado was listed in the Book of Archaeological, Ethnographic, and Landscape Heritage (*Livro do Tombo Arqueológico, Etnográfico e Paisagístico*), the heritage body was still known as SPHAN (*Serviço do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional*) p. Iphan, 2023) (Alves, 2021).

On the other hand, Oxum *et al* (2021, p. 80) highlight that Iphan's heritage practices throughout the 20th century often overlooked the cultural diversity of Brazilian society, once instead of recognising the diversity of cultural traditions, the heritage body focused on specific artistic and architectural styles, particularly the colonial baroque one, as the primary representation of national identity. It was a rather selective approach to heritage preservation that underscores the broader context in which the collection's initial safeguarding was framed, raising questions about whose narratives and histories were deemed worthy of protection and representation (Oxum *et al*, 2021).

Within the Police Museum domain, the collection was publicly displayed from the 1950s onwards, and its description followed the official nomenclature of the period (Alves, 202). At the time, the recently established museum housed objects from various police precincts, displaying the Afro-Brazilian religious items alongside police uniforms and equipment, Nazi and Communist propaganda, as well as other gaming and betting items (Alves, 2021, p. 13). In that sense, Correa (2009) argues that the overarching category for these objects to be put together was *crime*, reflecting what was deemed worthy of being criminalised and, at that stage, *musealised*.

Figure 2: Main hall of the Police Museum



Note. Photo by Luiz Alphonsus, 1978. Available in Maggie and Rafael (2013)

Throughout the social life of the collection, several concerns were raised regarding the Civil Police Museum's inability to provide appropriate care for the objects, neither from a museological standpoint nor concerning the traditional forms of spiritual and religious stewardship the collection required (Alves, 2021; Pereira, 2017). Deeply rooted in racist stereotypes, the collection nonetheless remained part of the museum's permanent exhibition until 1989, when a fire in the building resulted in the loss of 37 sacred pieces (Alves, 2021). Following this incident, due to a lack of funds and internal crises within the Police, the remaining objects were transferred to storage under questionable conditions, with little regard for basic safeguarding measures (Alves, 2021, p. 13).

Figure 3: Display of Nosso Sagrado at the Police Museum



Note. Photo by Luiz Alphonsus, 1978. Available in Maggie and Rafael (2013)

In the years that followed, concerns around the collection's custody and management became more pressing. As Alves (2021) recalls, the first formal attempt to retrieve the sacred items from the Civil Police occurred in the 1970s, when members of a research group at the Fluminense Federal University (*Universidade Federal Fluminense*), in collaboration with the religious communities, submitted a document calling for the return of the objects to their rightful owners. The request, however, was handed over to DOPS, the Department of Political and Social Order (*Departamento de Ordem Política e Social*), an agency known for its role in surveilling and persecuting groups deemed subversive during the Vargas era and the subsequent military dictatorship (Alves, 2021). This episode illustrates how authoritarian structures effectively silenced early restitution claims and contributed to what Alves (2021) describes as a broader culture of oblivion surrounding the collection, a condition that persisted for decades.

Despite institutional neglect and repression, resistance from the religious communities endured. Over time, leaders from different *terreiros* continued to speak out against the Police's possession of the sacred objects. Among them, Mãe Meninazinha de Oxum, from Ilê Omolu Oxum, recalled the stories passed down by her grandmother about the pieces stolen from their

community and kept by the Police (Oxum *et al*, 2021; Brasil, 2024). Representing the religious communities on a broader level, Oxum argues that having the objects at the Police represents and perpetuates the crime of violence and racism committed by the State against Afro-Brazilian religions, reiterating the need for their transference (Brasil, 2024).

3.1.1. Liberte Nosso Sagrado Campaign and results

In 2017, such demands converged into a large-scale campaign, the *Liberte Nosso Sagrado* (closely translated to “Free Our Sacred” in English), a name that by itself reflects the imminent call for the release of the items that were confiscated by the Police. This movement marked a significant milestone in the broader dispute over the collection, involving multiple stakeholders, such as the Federal Public Ministry (*Ministério Público Federal*), Iphan, museums, cultural institutions, politicians, students, the Civil Police, the Afro-Brazilian religious communities and a considerable part of the broader Brazilian society, calling for the transference of *Nosso Sagrado* to a new museum in Rio de Janeiro, as well as for an official change in the name of the collection (Alves, 2021).

The campaign officially started through the efforts of the state deputy, Flavio Serafini, from the left-wing party PSOL¹⁰, in close contact with community members, starting from a point of understanding the community needs, the urgency of this issue and considering the restitution as an act of historic reparation for African and Afro-Brazilian communities (Alves, 2021). On top of ethical and ownership considerations, the campaign also criticised technical issues with the conservation of the *Nosso Sagrado* items (Alves, 2021, p. 34). It is also important to highlight how the campaign denounced the barriers in accessing the collection while under Police custody,

¹⁰ PSOL - *Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* (Socialism and Liberty Party) is a Brazilian left-wing political party founded in 2004, advocating for social justice, equality, and civil rights. Flávio Serafini, a sociologist and educator, has been serving as a state deputy in the Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro since 2015.

connecting it with racism and religious prejudice behind the police raids in terreiros (Alves, 2021, p. 30-31).

The campaign was very active from the moment it was officially launched, adopting several strategies to strengthen the movement. Alves (2021, p. 35) highlights the first public hearing, which took place in September 2017, as a great effort to bring visibility to the cause and promote a debate among the multiple stakeholders involved in the custody dispute. Another highlight of the campaign's first year is the production of the documentary called "Nosso Sagrado", by *Quiprocó Filmes*, which brings together testimonials from religious leaders of Umbanda and Candomblé, exposing the communities' views and feelings about the collection (Alves, 2021, p. 44). The audiovisual circulated widely through screenings in schools, universities and *terreiros* across Rio de Janeiro, also reaching international audiences in festivals in France and the United States (Alves, 2021). Combined with active engagement on social media, public conferences, and visits to museums and traditional places of worship, these efforts played a central role in increasing public awareness of the movement.

In 2018, the partnership with Museu da República was established as part of the campaign's efforts to find a new institution willing to host and care for the collection (Alves, 2021). The museum, at the time directed by Mário Chagas¹¹, promptly committed to offering proper museological treatment for the collection, while also recognising the importance of including traditional religious perspectives in its management and safeguarding. As part of this commitment, the museum proposed the formation of a workgroup composed of religious leaders from different *terreiros* of the city, ensuring that decisions would be guided by the values and practices of traditional communities (Oxum *et al*, 2021, p. 89). This ongoing partnership

¹¹ Mário Chagas is a Brazilian museologist, poet, and professor, known for his contributions to social museology and for advocating more inclusive and community-oriented museum practices. Chagas is co-creator of the Brazilian Institute of Museums (IBRAM) and was director of the Museu da República during the transfer process of the Nosso Sagrado collection, playing a key role in establishing a participatory model for its care and management (Chagas, 2020).

reinvigorated the negotiations within the legal framework, resulting in the transfer approval by all stakeholders on August 7th, 2020 (Oxum *et al*, 2021).

Situated in the historic *Palácio do Catete*, the Museu da República has long played a symbolic role in the country's political memory. The building, with its predominantly neoclassical architecture, was originally constructed in the 19th century as the residence of the Baron of Nova Friburgo (Alves, 2021). Following the proclamation of the Republic, the palace became the official seat of the Brazilian presidency, hosting successive leaders until the capital was moved to Brasília (Museu da República, n.d.). It is also historically marked as the site of President Getúlio Vargas's death in 1954. The palace became home to the Division of Republican History under the *Museu Histórico Nacional* in 1960, aiming to preserve objects related to the country's republican history (Alves, 2021, p. 49). In 1983, it was administratively separated from the *Museu Histórico Nacional* and became the Museu da República as it is known nowadays. Today, its collection includes objects, photographs, documents, furniture, and artworks linked to former presidents and political figures, while its gardens remain an open and accessible space frequently used by both tourists and the local community (Alves, 2021, p. 49).

The transfer of the collection from the Police Museum to the Museu da República took place on September 21st, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was marked by a welcoming ceremony organised by the museum team and the community workgroup. Given the religious and symbolic importance of the objects, it was the leaders of the Afro-Brazilian communities who determined the order in which the boxes would be opened and led the rituals around the pieces. As stated by Oxum *et al* (2021, p. 92), the ceremony was filled with emotion, symbolising the collective effort to rebuild and honour the significance of such an important collection and, on a broader level, of Afro-Brazilian heritage.

Figure 4: Transference to Museu da República



Note. Photos by Elisângela Leite. Religion Unplugged, available at: <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/7/8/documentary-respect-our-sacred-exposes-the-struggle-to-reverse-the-criminalization-of-african-religions-in-brazil>

The collection's original name, assigned by the Police and rooted in racist and exoticising stereotypes, was only officially changed to *Nosso Sagrado* by Iphan on March 21, 2023 (Iphan, 2023). However, before this official recognition, *Nosso Sagrado* and other alternative names were used by the communities and other adherents of the campaign, both in an attempt to resist racist classifications and to name it in a way that better represents their identity and significance (Pereira, 2017). Alternative names can either follow a descriptive pattern, such as “the collection of sacred Afro-Brazilian objects under the Police Museum custody” (Pereira, 2017, my translation) and make other references to the collection’s sacred significance to Afro-Brazilian religions (Torres, 2022; Oxum *et al*, 2021; Cruz, 2021; Hollembach, 2021).

The restitution of the sacred collection represents a milestone for Afro-Brazilian communities (Oxum *et al*, 2021, p. 88). It aligns with broader anti-racist initiatives and efforts to combat religious intolerance. On top of that, Alves (2021, p. 69) argues that the shared management agreement between the religious communities and the museum is one of the campaign's most significant victories, a step toward giving back voice and agency to groups historically subjected to violence. As such, the collection has come to symbolise not only national identity and resistance but also the growing recognition of African heritage in Brazil and beyond. What began as a localised community movement has grown to resonate on an international scale, drawing parallels to global campaigns like Black Lives Matter (Leyh, 2020).

Regarding the collection's biographical continuity, since its transfer to the Museu da República, it has remained in the museum's storage, except for a brief temporary exhibition that took place between November 2021 and April 2022. According to Torres (2022, p. 73), the *Laroiê - Caminhos Abertos Para O Nosso Sagrado* exhibition reflects on the Republic Museum's efficient research and display, as it depicted accessible and informative content, and had elements such as signs throughout the museum gardens and surroundings, therefore having a clear purpose of inviting the public into the museum. Nonetheless, going through the description provided by Torres (2022, p. 66-74), it is possible to conclude that a small number of objects were on display, some of which would also be acknowledged within the exhibition on Google Arts & Culture (Republic Museum, 2021).

Out of 519 objects, only 10 are on display at the online exhibition on Google Arts & Culture (Museu da República, 2021). It consists of a collaborative creation among the museum, the community, researchers, and other cultural institutions in Brazil. According to Cruz (2021), the small number of artefacts available on the referred website is due to the huge amount of necessary research to be done after years of negligence towards the collection. Finally, Torres (2022) argues

that the chosen platform is proven to be a good strategy for sharing the collection with the general public, especially considering that the exhibit was created during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

3.2. Coloniality, Contestation and Decolonial Frameworks

Museums have long been central institutions for preserving and interpreting cultural heritage. However, their role is increasingly contested as they are called to confront their colonial histories and structural biases. As socially constructed institutions, museums not only reflect but also shape political and societal dynamics, which has placed them at the heart of contemporary debates on contested heritage and the decolonisation of cultural institutions (Whittington, 2021, p. 252). This section will explore the relationship between contestation and museums, as well as different interpretations and frameworks posed towards their decolonisation.

The origins of the modern museum can be traced back to the private collections of European elites in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, commonly referred to as *cabinets of curiosity*. These early collections were composed of objects gathered through colonial expeditions, trade, and extraction, and served to demonstrate the collector's worldliness and power over distant and 'exotic' realms (Abt, 2006). As these cabinets gradually evolved into public institutions in the 18th century, many of their epistemological and organisational structures were retained, particularly their emphasis on hierarchical classification and the objectification of non-European cultures (Hein, 2006; Abt, 2006). In this instance, museums emerged as a tool of imperial authority, reinforcing Eurocentric worldviews and shaping historical narratives in ways that aligned with colonial ideologies.

Within this context, Vergès (2024, p. 46) frames the museum not only as contested itself, but also as a site of and for contestation, emphasising that arts and culture have long been battlegrounds. If one looks at museums through the interpretative lens of Vergès (2024), it is

possible to identify their very foundation as entangled with the history and culture of theft, looting and confiscations (Vergès, 2024, p. 14). This intrinsic dynamic explains why the existence of museums is inseparable from ongoing calls for restitution, repatriation, and historical reparation, as they operate through the prism of structural coloniality and continue to hold and display objects that belong to the communities from which they were taken. Hicks (2020, p. 15) argues that such objects and collections represent histories of loss and taking, reflecting therefore in a regime of visibility embedded in violence and objectification.

Clifford (1997) brings the concept of the Museum as a Contact Zone to describe museums as spaces where different cultures meet, interact, clash and negotiate their identities, particularly in the context of colonial and postcolonial histories. Contact zone, therefore, refers to social spaces where cultures, often marked by unequal power dynamics, come into contact. In this framework, museums become contested spaces where cultural meanings are (re)negotiated. On the other hand, Boast (2011) highlights the inherent asymmetries present when Clifford's (1997) concept is put into practice, as it can, on the contrary, reinforce neocolonial power dynamics.

The persistence of these colonial legacies in contemporary museological practices is best understood through the lens of *coloniality*, a term used by Quijano (2007) to describe the ongoing systems of power, knowledge, and existence that were established during European imperial expansion. For Quijano (2007, p. 169), coloniality is not a historical residue but a structural condition that still sustains global inequalities through racialised and hierarchical systems of knowledge. In museums, coloniality is embedded not only in the ways collections were assembled but also in their interpretative regimes, institutional hierarchies, and assumptions about authority, legitimacy, and expertise (Whittington, 2021; Simpson, 1996; Escudero, 2020).

In the context of *Nosso Sagrado*, Whittington (2021) emphasises the influential role of museums in shaping the perception of the *Other*, portraying them as mere objects of study instead of recognising their humanity and complexity. This process often perpetuates harmful stereotypes,

such as exoticism, which becomes evident in museum exhibitions and activities. Complementing this view, Vergès (2024, p. 20) highlights the issue of *museification*, where objects lose their original contexts and are transformed into static, decontextualised artefacts that fit within Western institutional narratives.

The concept of contested heritage is crucial for understanding such tensions. Museums are frequently arenas of dispute where narratives of national identity, memory, and representation are negotiated and often contested (Clifford, 1997; Boast, 2011; Vergès, 2024). Contestation arises in multiple forms: claims for the return of looted artefacts, critiques of Eurocentric curation, resistance to funding coming from exploitative industries, and demands for the inclusion of marginalised histories and voices (Vergès, 2024, p. 46). The case of *Nosso Sagrado* exemplifies these broader dynamics – as a collection historically tied to religious persecution and racism, its recontextualization through shared management with Afro-Brazilian religious communities at the *Museu da República* offers a significant example of how heritage itself becomes a battleground over ownership, meaning, legitimacy, and memory.

In response, Vergès (2024, p. 47) draws attention to how museums have recently begun to confront such issues related to race, gender, climate and coloniality. These responses, she argues, arise from increasing public pressure and the growing visibility of activist demands for restitution, reparation, and structural transformation. In recent years, the topic of decolonisation in museums has gained increasing attention, reflecting broader societal reckonings with colonial histories and their lasting legacies (Whittington, 2021). In this regard, Leyh (2020) notes that the Black Lives Matter movement has played a significant role in amplifying these discussions internationally, particularly through its critique of public monuments that glorify colonial figures linked to slavery and imperialism. However, debates on decolonising museums extend beyond contemporary activism, with roots in postcolonial movements and longstanding calls for the restitution of looted artefacts (Whittington, 2021).

Recent scholarly and activist work suggests that decolonisation of museums does not consist of a single event or strategy but a multilayered, ongoing process that is constantly being revisited. For instance, Whittington (2021, p. 250) argues that if museums are to address the persistent coloniality of their structures, they must go beyond inclusion to handing over control, particularly representational power, to historically marginalised communities such as Black and Indigenous peoples. This involves not only co-curation but a radical rethinking of authority, epistemology, and institutional purpose. Similarly, Simpson (1996, p. 11) highlights the importance of genuine community involvement, arguing that museums must move beyond representation to establish reciprocal relationships, where the fate of the museum is intertwined with that of the community it serves.

Similarly, Hicks (2020, p. 13) argues that decolonisation cannot be achieved through superficial changes, such as simply rewriting labels or rearranging looted objects. Rather, he calls for a more profound transformation that engages museums as spaces for reflecting on and addressing these histories, having as the first step a deep acknowledgement of the violent colonial past and the dispossession of cultures, including providing a platform to the voices of those who were dispossessed (Hicks, 2020). For Quijano (2007, p. 175), this implies an epistemological rupture with Eurocentric totalities, making room for Indigenous, Black, and non-Western ways of knowing, which are not just additional voices in the conversation but are essential to creating new cultural institutions.

Another method for decolonising museums, as emphasised by both Whittington (2021) and Unruh (2015), is the promotion of dialogical practices. These practices involve open-ended and participatory engagements that challenge established narratives and foster collective meaning-making among visitors and communities. As Whittington (2021, p. 253) argues, such practices offer a counterweight to the museum's historical emphasis on materiality and

categorisation, and align more closely with community-led needs and modes of knowledge production.

The claim for a change of discourse emphasis in museum displays is also part of the decolonial debate. On the one hand, Whittington (2021) highlights the shift of narratives made in collaboration with traditional communities, i.g, Indigenous peoples shifting focus from a past of violence to an emphasis on connection with ancestors and richness of their cultural and spiritual expressions. On the other hand, Vergès (2024, p. 16) argues that Neoliberal anti-racism promotes societal amnesia, pushing society to move forward while discarding memories it deems burdensome. For her, there is an imminent need to claim memories of violence and resistance (Vergès, 2024).

Equally important are the alternative models to the traditional museum proposed by Whittington (2021) and Quijano (2015). The argument is that community museums and other types of cultural centres led by local groups are at an advantage within the revolutionary agenda, given that these often do not face the same limitations linked to public funding and rigid hierarchical management structures mainstream museums have, thus, having more freedom to develop innovative practices (Whittington, 2021, p 265). In fact, within such models, the use of the term museum itself is contested, as many argue it can evoke and resemble colonial legacies, institutional authority, and the perception of culture as stagnant or obsolete (Whittington, 2021; Quijano, 2020).

In this regard, in contrast to the decolonising practices so far discussed, Vergès (2024) offers a more radical critique. According to the author, the decolonisation of museums is rather impossible: “No institution can be decolonial unless society is decolonized, and the museum does not exist outside the social world that created it.” (Vergès, 2024, p. 19). Vergès (2024, p. 05) argues that decolonisation will only be possible if a programme of absolute disorder is implemented, with the effective construction of a post-racist, post-imperialist and post-patriarchal

world. Her argument is also based on the idea that museum practices enhancing greater diversity in its displays and programmes are rather superficial and operate within a neoliberal approach, aiming at reconciliation when questions such as *reparation* and the *irreparable* are not in discussion. In her words, “When people in power understand that a certain form of inclusion does not threaten them, they are ready for it” (Vergès, 2023). Additionally, Carvalho (2025) points out that Vergès’ interpretative lens rejects the museum as a space for social cohesion – on the contrary, a disorder starts by understanding the museum as contested.

Rather than pursuing what she sees as an impossible decolonisation within existing institutional frameworks, Vergès (2024; 2025) calls for a radical reimagining of what museums can be. Her concept of the *post-museum* refuses entrenched hierarchies of race, gender, and class, and draws inspiration from community-led, ephemeral, and activist-driven models as promising movements towards decolonial futures. The post-museum appears as a decolonial practice as they are, in her view, a space of radical possibility, shaped by anti-colonial, feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist aesthetics (Vergès, 2024, p. 19). In other words, Vergès’ (2024) vision for decolonisation is not a matter of reforming existing institutions, but of creating entirely new cultural forms, rooted in what she describes as *absolute disorder*.

Lastly, focusing on the Brazilian context, Chagas (2017) argues, decolonisation begins with the decolonisation of the *museological thought* itself: a critical rupture with Eurocentric frameworks that have historically shaped what museums are, do, and value in different contexts. Central to this process is the recognition of community museums as legitimate and transformative cultural practices. Since the 1950s, Chagas (2017) points out, Brazil has witnessed the emergence of numerous grassroots initiatives, such as the *Museu da Maré*¹² and *Museu Vivo de São Bento*¹³ in

¹² The *Museu da Maré* is a community museum created by local residents in 2006 in the *Maré* favela complex, Rio de Janeiro. It seeks to preserve and share the history, memory, and identity of those who live in the territory, affirming their narratives through thematic and participatory approaches (Museu da Maré, n.d.). It is the first favela museum in the city of Rio created and managed by its residents (Chagas, 2018).

¹³ The *Museu Vivo do São Bento* is an ecomuseum created in 2008 by residents of the *São Bento* rural area in the city of *Duque de Caxias* (RJ). Structured as a *museu de percurso*, it promotes the appreciation of local memory, traditional

the state of Rio de Janeiro, that reframe the museum as a space of collective memory, resistance, and political affirmation. Crucially, Chagas (2017, p. 127) highlights that decolonisation also involves preserving and respecting cultural landscapes, environmental and territorial rights, and intangible heritage, while also maintaining a critical awareness that these categories have no intrinsic value outside the social and political uses attributed to them.

Whether through institutional reform, community-led practices, or more radical redefinitions of the museum itself, what emerges from the literature is a shared urgency to confront the colonial legacies that continue to influence museological thought and practice. The case of *Nosso Sagrado* brings these questions into focus, as it serves not only as an example of contested heritage but also as a platform for potential transformation, grounded in the shared management agreement and community agency. As the next section explores, responding to these challenges also requires (re)thinking engagement and educational practices.

3.3. Museum Education and Engagement

As museums continue to reshape themselves in response to contemporary social, political, and cultural challenges, their educational purposes have become increasingly central to institutional missions and practices (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Hein, 2006). However, as Hooper-Greenhill notes, this growing emphasis on education does not reflect a unified understanding of what museum education entails or how it should be implemented. Approaches vary widely, reflecting broader debates about whose knowledge is privileged, who museums serve, and which forms of learning and engagement they promote. This final section of the chapter provides a brief history of museum education and brings relevant frameworks for museum education and engagement.

knowledge, and rural cultural heritage through collective walks, storytelling, and community engagement (Museu Vivo do São Bento, n.d.).

According to Hein (2006, p. 334), the recognition of education as a specialised function of museums is largely a 20th-century development, shaped by broader socio-political movements, the consolidation of formal education systems, and research in child development. Over the last century, museums have moved away from passive and restrictive models of education toward more dynamic and participatory practices, leading to the development of a specialised field of studies and practice within museums and galleries (Hein, 2006, p. 343). Within initiatives brought up by Hein (2006, p. 344) that consist of tasks developed by museum educators, there are: museum tours, learning programmes for communities and multiple audiences, classes, partnerships and online programmes and resources.

This shift in educational thinking also corresponds to an institutional redefinition of museums themselves. As noted by Brown and Mairesse (2018) and Hein (2006), not only has the ICOM definition of museums undergone several modifications over the past century, but the very understanding of what museums are and who they are for has been the subject of constant debate. The most recent definition, adopted in 2022, describes museums as:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing (ICOM, 2022).

As argued by Hein (2006, p. 342), the language used in this context represents a notable shift from previous definitions, especially when compared to the original 1946 guideline¹⁴, which made no mention of education. Today, education is not simply listed as one among many functions, but tied directly to values such as accessibility, participation, diversity, and ethical practice. This shift reflects a broader change in the way museums face their responsibilities, how they engage with their communities, and how they envision their missions.

¹⁴ 1946 ICOM's definition of museum: "The word 'museum' includes all collections, open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material, including zoos and botanical gardens, but excluding libraries, except in so far as they maintain permanent exhibition rooms." (Lehmannová, 2020).

In this context, Hein (2006) draws on constructivist theories of learning to propose a participatory and reflective approach to museum education. In contrast to traditional transmission-based models, the constructivist perspective understands learning as an active process through which individuals build knowledge based on their prior experiences, interests, and interactions with the world. In museum settings, this implies that visitors are far from passive recipients of predefined information, but rather active participants in making meaning through engagement with objects, narratives, and space (Hein, 2006, p. 344-347).

Similarly, Hooper-Greenhill (2007) frames museum education as a dynamic and potentially transformative process, shaped by the cultural meanings visitors establish through their engagement with the museum content. The author calls attention to the creative and singular environment of the museum as a facilitator of meaningful learning, precisely because it offers an educational experience that differs greatly from school or other formal settings (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 4). In this context, the production of meaning occurs as visitors establish personal connections with what they encounter, allowing them not only to perceive themselves within the museum space but also to make sense of their own identities (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 45). As she states, “If culture is understood as a process of signification, a means of producing meaning that shapes world views, then learning in museums and other cultural organisations is potentially dynamic and profound, producing self-identities” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 9).

Building on that, Falk and Dierking (2000, p. 10) developed and applied the Contextual Model of Learning framework to museums, arguing that all learning is situated within a series of contexts. For the authors, learning is an ongoing, integrated experience that is shaped by overlapping contexts and the interaction between them. They are: the *personal* context, composed of motivations and expectations visitors set for their museum visits, their prior knowledge, interests, and beliefs, as well as the choice and control they have over what they want to learn; the *sociocultural* context, consisting of the types of mediations and interactions, going from the

premise that a museum is itself a sociocultural space in nature; and the *physical* context, which refers to the way visitors react to the museum design, space and proposed activities (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

Free-choice learning tends to be nonlinear, is personally motivated, and involves considerable choice on the part of the learner as to what to learn, as well as where and when to participate in learning. This type of free-choice learning is not restricted to museums, but it is in museums that we currently best understand it (Falk & Dierking, 2010, p. 13).

This model highlights not only the complexity of the learning process in museums, but also the central role of the visitor as an active agent in constructing and making sense of their own experience. Falk and Dierking (2010, p. 84) argue that learning can be a selective and intrinsically motivated process, as museum visitors tend to choose what to engage with, often gravitating toward content that resonates with their knowledge and personal interests and beliefs. Importantly, the authors argue that free-choice learning is not disconnected from more relaxed and enjoyment-focused visits, as participants often seek a hybrid experience that is both educational and entertaining (2000, p. 87).

To maximise this potential, Falk and Dierking (2010, p. 188) propose a series of recommendations for museums, including designing experiences that allow for personalisation and multiple paths of engagement. In that sense, encouraging individual agency and offering visitors control over their learning can foster deeper connections between exhibitions and personal meaning-making. When museum content relates to the lived experiences and needs of its audiences, it can support not only cognitive understanding, but also self-worth, recognition, and a strengthened sense of identity (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 189), which stands out as a crucial consideration when working with historically marginalised narratives and collections like *Nosso Sagrado*.

Accordingly, Simon (2010) offers a practical guide on fostering engagement through exhibits, community collaboration, and social platforms. Simon (2010, p. 3) argues that

participatory approaches are essential to addressing common critiques of traditional museums: being disconnected from people's lives, resistant to change, and exclusive in voice and perspective. By encouraging public input, dialogue, and creativity, participation becomes key to making institutions more responsive to diverse audiences and social realities. According to Simon (2010, p. 3), an effective participatory cultural institution is “a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content”, meaning they contribute their own ideas and expressions, discuss what is on at the space, and socialise with others who share their interests.

Of great relevance to the case of *Nosso Sagrado*, Simon (2010) highlights the importance of collaboration and co-creation as meaningful strategies to engage communities in museum practice. According to Simon (2010, p.232), collaborative projects are committed relationships where museum professionals and community partners work side by side in the development of programs, exhibitions, and initiatives. These relationships are essential to ensuring authenticity, sharing authority and management, and offering opportunities for mutual learning. Similarly, co-creative projects often originate from community needs rather than institutional goals, shifting the balance of power and encouraging participants to actively engage and to (re)shape content and narratives (Simon, 2010, p. 264).

Building on these perspectives, Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1970) offers a critical framework through which museum education can be reimagined as a practice of liberation and social transformation. Central to his work is the concept of *conscientização* (conscientization), or the awakening of critical consciousness, which involves the process by which oppressed individuals become critically aware of the social, political, and economic contradictions that shape their lives and commit to transforming them (Freire, 1970, p. 35). For Freire, education must be a dialogical and liberating praxis, grounded in the lived realities of learners and forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (Freire, 1970, p. 48). Rejecting the banking model of education – in which learners are treated as passive recipients of knowledge within a

teacher-student dichotomy – Freire (1970, p. 81-86) advocates instead for a problem-posing education, which sees the world not as static but as a reality in process, where both educators and learners are active agents in a shared cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action.

In the museum context, Freire's concept of conscientisation calls for educational practices that centre dialogue as the very condition through which learning takes place. For Freire (1979, p. 90-93), dialogue is an act grounded in humility, mutual respect, and a shared pursuit of meaning – a humanising process that resists hierarchy and (re)affirms the learner as a historical subject in the world. Knowledge, in this sense, does not preexist the learning encounter, but emerges through communication, through the ongoing reinvention of reality that happens when people reflect and act together: “Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (1970, p. 93). In museum practice, this principle invites a shift from didactic, one-way transmissions of knowledge to participatory engagements that foster listening, reciprocity, and co-creation. In the case of the *Nosso Sagrado* collection, this dialogical relation underpins collaborative practices in which community members are heard, consulted, and actively involved in shaping the narratives about themselves (Freire, 1970; Simon, 2010).

Similarly, bell hooks (2003) builds on Freire's (2005) vision of education as a practice of freedom and resistance, placing hope, love, and community at the heart of a transformative pedagogy. The author argues that education must be redefined as an ongoing democratic process, grounded in mutual responsibility between teachers and learners towards the dismantling of systems of oppression. In that sense, hooks (2003) argues that democratic education extends beyond the confines of formal schooling and embraces various environments that can contribute meaningfully to learning and transformation: “To bring a spirit of study to learning that takes place both in and beyond classroom settings, learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety” (hooks, 2003, p. 42).

Equally important, hooks (2003) also highlights how systems of oppression operate through intersecting forms of violence, particularly those rooted in race, class, gender, and sexuality. Central to her critique is the concept of *white supremacy*, which she prefers over the term *racism* for its capacity to name the broader, structural system that shapes cultural values, knowledge production, and educational practices: “White-supremacist thinking informs every aspect of our culture including the way we learn, the content of what we learn, and the manner in which we are taught” (hooks, 2003, p. 25). For hooks (2003), building an anti-racist education not only involves acknowledging existing forms of discrimination, but also a sustained commitment to detaching from these structures, fostering critical awareness, and creating educational environments that affirm dignity, justice, and collective liberation.

As argued by Chagas *et al* (2008, p. 97), there is a very close relationship between what Freire (2005) and later hooks (2003) convey as Pedagogy of Freedom and the Social Museology approach, widely spread within the Brazilian context of museums, especially in terms of social, political and economic transformation. Social Museology emerged from and within societies, having as its premise political and participative characteristics, where museums both emerge and act as responses to communities’ needs, as spaces for (self)expression and understanding, and as fruitful environments for different kinds of freedom (Chagas *et al*, 2018, p. 87-97). As argued by the authors, Social Museology is grounded in the defence of human rights, including the rights of workers, women, Black Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+ communities, and many other groups (Chagas *et al*, 2018, p. 96).

Following the broader movement that led to the development of New Museology in the 1980s, Social Museology gained increasing recognition in the final decades of the 20th century, positioning the museum as a space for social expression (Chagas *et al*, 2018). In Brazil, as argued by Chagas *et al* (2018), Social Museology continues to evolve rapidly, increasingly operating on the margins of public authority and asserting its right to exist independently, contributing to the

emergence of new museum types and typologies, such as Indigenous, Quilombolas and Favela museums¹⁵, all adhering to a democratic, participative and inclusive approach. These experiences within Brazilian museology, as Chagas *et al* (2018, p. 80) argue, not only reveal that the museum field in the country remains open to diverse forms of creative and decolonial ideas, but also work as a reminder of the challenge in nurturing this field, especially within a country where social exclusion is an ongoing issue.

In addition, Brown and Mairesse (2018, p. 528) inform that museums began to be recognised for their social role during the interwar period, gaining increased awareness by the late 1960s, particularly within the Latin American New Museology movement. The 1972 Santiago del Chile Round Table, along with subsequent initiatives in the 1970s, marked a significant shift in museum practices, moving towards a model centred on community needs (Brown & Mairesse, 2018, p. 529). These efforts have also been reflected in cultural policies, such as the Museums Change Lives manifesto (Museums Association, 2017), which asserts the potential of museums to respond to urgent societal issues:

With society facing issues such as poverty, inequality, intolerance and discrimination, museums can help us understand, debate, and challenge these concerns. They can also enhance everyone's life chances by breaking down barriers to access and inclusion (Museums Association, 2017).

In light of these frameworks, it becomes clear that museum education today is inextricably linked to its social responsibility to promote participation, dialogue, and social justice (Hein,

¹⁵ Such museums have emerged within specific communities to protect and share their memories, heritage and cultural expressions, always building on the premise that museums can be used in favour of their causes (Chagas *et al*, 2018, p. 98). Bringing a few examples is important to demonstrate how this operated within the Brazilian context. The *Museu Kuahí*, established in 2007 in Oiapoque (Amapá), is an Indigenous museum created by the Palikur, Karipuna, Galibi Marworno, and Galibi Kali'na peoples. It preserves and promotes their cultural heritage through exhibitions, traditional arts, and intercultural educational activities, with active management and participation from Indigenous communities (Museu Kuahí, n.d.). The *Parque Memorial Quilombo dos Palmares*, located in *União dos Palmares* (Alagoas), is a protected cultural and historical site dedicated to preserving the memory of the *Quilombo dos Palmares* (the largest and most enduring quilombo of Brazil's colonial period). Established and managed by the Fundação Cultural Palmares, the park serves as a symbol of Afro-Brazilian resistance, cultural identity, and heritage preservation (Fundação Cultural Palmares, n.d.). The *Museu de Favela* (MUF) was established in 2008 by members of the *Pavão*, *Pavãozinho*, and *Cantagalo* favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It is an open-air, territorial and living museum dedicated to preserving the memories and cultural heritage of its communities (Museu de Favela, n.d.).

2006). Whether through constructivist learning models, participatory practices, or emancipatory pedagogies, educational engagement in museums increasingly centres the visitor as an active, situated subject. These perspectives are particularly relevant, as the following chapter will explore, to understanding how community members engage with the Nosso Sagrado collection and envision its potential as a catalyst for transformative museum practice.

4. FINDINGS

This chapter will present and discuss the main themes that emerged from coding and analysing the dataset proposed for this thesis, aiming at answering the three research questions guiding the study (Section 1.3). It begins by exploring the meanings and significance that participants associated with *Nosso Sagrado* and, more broadly, with Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. The second section examines the challenges faced by these communities, including experiences of discrimination and resistance. The discussion then turns to participants' reflections on representation and history, two central concepts in participants' narratives, ranging from critiques of existing museum practices to proposals for more meaningful and self-determined forms of representation. The final section examines the educational potential of the collection and the futures envisioned for *Nosso Sagrado*.

The following analysis is primarily a result of five interviews with members of the Afro-Brazilian religious communities from the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Therefore, it is important to consider the participants' characteristics and backgrounds as they may influence the emergent data. Table 1 consists of a summary of participants' profiles, whose religious and personal trajectories vary greatly, as well as interview dates and duration. Participants range in age from 25 to 40 years old. The majority of participants self-identified as Black, with one participant self-identifying as white. All participants are connected to the education system in some capacity: four participants work within educational settings, while one is a PhD researcher and artist. Except for one individual, all participants live in areas located far from the city centre:

Table 1: Participants' profiles

Participant	Gender	Age group	Race	Region in Rio	Background	Interview date and duration
P1	F	31-40	White	West Zone	Works in education	31/05/2025 - 38:49
P2	F	31-40	Black	West Zone	Works in education	10/06/2025 - 24:07
P3	M	31-40	Black	North Zone	PhD student and artist	12/06/2025 - 37:05
P4	M	25-30	Black	South Zone	Works in education	12/06/2025 - 56:47
P5	M	31-40	Black	West Zone	Works in education	17/06/2025 - 49:42

4.1. Significance of the Collection

A central theme that emerged from the thematic analysis is the profound sense of sacredness, relationality and spiritual continuity surrounding the *Nosso Sagrado* collection. Across all interviews, participants consistently challenged the notion of sacred objects as inert or historical artefacts to be displayed in isolation. Instead, they described them as living entities, imbued with agency, spiritual and symbolic meaning that are in an ongoing relationship with Afro-Brazilian religious practices.

Although participants in this study come from diverse Afro-religious backgrounds and personal trajectories, their descriptions of religious life often reflect a shared worldview, one in which spirituality is not separated from daily experience, identity, or social positioning and expression. This was particularly evident in the narrative of one participant, who articulated this integration with clarity: “My life has become somewhat inseparable from my religious practices.” (P3, *my translation, here and throughout*). Reflecting on their spiritual journey, the same participant remarked: “Spirituality is always a political stance in the world: it shapes the choices you make, the groups you align with, and the ideologies you choose to uphold.” (P3). Another participant highlighted the sense of meaning that their religious beliefs brought them: “it was that

love at first sight, you know, it was what made sense to me, it was what hit me like, ‘wow, I’ve spent a lifetime looking for this, and this is it’” (P1). These reflections suggest that such beliefs are chosen, affirmed, felt, and embodied in ways that shape practitioners’ daily life.

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasised the relevance and influence of African and Indigenous heritage in their religious practices and beliefs, as well as something that shapes their connection with space and nature. These references appeared not only as something to be remembered, but also as a present to be honoured and preserved. Participants frequently mentioned the importance of recognising Indigenous ancestry and cosmologies alongside African traditions. One participant reflected: “Afro-Brazilian religions are sacred spaces that deserve care and reverence just like any other faith. They’re one more way to reach God, and they carry the force of Indigenous ancestry, the native strength of our country.” (P2). Other participants spoke about spaces that assume different instances and expressions, such as forests, rivers, streets, and their own places of worship.

This shared worldview directly shaped how participants perceive and talk about the Nosso Sagrado collection. Rather than interpreting the objects only as historical artefacts that stay in a museum, participants attributed symbolic and religious meanings that go beyond their materiality. There is a general understanding that the Nosso Sagrado collection is composed of items that continue to hold power, presence and agency nowadays. Relationality was an important topic of discussion on the interviews with community members, as it is understood that Nosso Sagrado items correlate to participants’ everyday life and the sacred objects they currently hold and worship within their spaces, creating, therefore, a sense of temporal continuity, a sense of ongoing cultural and spiritual meaning and system. As described by a participant:

It’s incredible to see how certain things were made in the early 20th century and how we still make them the same way today. There’s a genealogy in the craftsmanship that validates how religious leaders continue to produce these objects nowadays. You look at them and think: ‘Ah, I know what this is, I still see this kind of object being made and used in my casa de santo.’ That temporal arc is very important from an educational

standpoint, too. It shows that people aren't just making things up. Since so much of this material culture gets lost over time, it's important to understand how this repertoire contributes to the legitimacy of the objects that are still in use today. I think that's really powerful (P3).

Additionally, a strong sense of belonging emerged as a central element in how participants relate to the Nosso Sagrado collection. Many described them as a living history, intimately tied to their ancestry, values and worldviews. The collection was seen as a strong point of collective memory, a material link to those who came before, and a symbolic affirmation that their traditions not only survived, but also resisted and continue to shape lives today. This experience of recognition was described as emotionally charged, even transformative, particularly when individuals were able to see themselves, their stories, and their beliefs reflected in the museum space. As one participant reflected: “It's a sense of belonging, you know? You look at it and you see yourself, your story, your values (...). It's a moment to reflect, to project yourself into history, into the world” (P4). Another participant described the collection and religion as a “space of refuge and recognition, where people like us meet, embrace, and celebrate diversity” (P5).

Participants' interpretative engagement with the collection was also marked by a strong historical consciousness. They understood how the Nosso Sagrado collection was violently assembled through police raids and acts of religious persecution, and how those same objects were once labelled and displayed as “Black Magic” by institutional authorities. While participants expressed satisfaction that the collection is now housed under shared management at the Museu da República, they also remained alert to its violent trajectory and to the need for continued vigilance:

These objects weren't supposed to be a museum collection in the first place. Many of them should have followed a different life cycle... They should have been returned to nature, destroyed, lost their enchantment (...). But for a number of reasons they now operate within this logic, and they have ended up taking on other political and denunciatory functions and I think this is very important (P3).

In that sense, the collection was often described as a great example to understand Brazil's broader relationship with Afro-Brazilian heritage, with changes in meanings and interpretations over time. One participant reflected: "I think the whole story of the Nosso Sagrado collection represents a symptom of Brazil's history. The trajectory of these objects reflects how Brazilian culture has treated Afro-Brazilian culture." (P3). Similarly, participants did not frame this as a concern relevant only to religious practitioners, but as something that speaks to Brazilian society as a whole. They argued that Afro-Brazilian traditions are intrinsically woven into the formation of the country itself, shaping national identity in profound ways. As one participant explained, "There should be more attention paid to this issue. Not just to talk about this difficult part, but to value this culture, because it's part of everyone. Everyone who lives here in Rio." (P5). The collection, therefore, becomes a lens through which to understand the structural nature of racism and religious prejudice, and the ongoing tension between recognition and exclusion in the public sphere.

This brings us to another layer of significance: the spiritual and symbolic agency of space. While museums are not traditionally seen as sacred places, some participants noted that, under certain conditions, these spaces could also carry spiritual meaning. As one participant explained: "Over time, other spaces also become part of this repertoire... musealised spaces, collections, etc. They start to carry spiritual agency too, just like in the terreiros." (P3). The notion that a museum can serve as a sacred space highlights a reimagining of its institutional role, where museum displays embrace a more ambitious social agenda that includes contemporary religious content and relevance (Buggeln, 2012). However, for that to happen, participants emphasised the need for intentionality, respect, and co-responsibility in how the collection is engaged with, both publicly and internally.

Fieldwork and on-site observation showed that the professionals involved with the Nosso Sagrado collection at Museu da República engage in its care and management with particular

attention and respect. This aspect became evident when various elements were analysed simultaneously: there is a clear sense of ethical commitment and sensibility in the way the museum staff talk about the collection and its history, the conditions under which it is stored, and in the collaborative approaches referenced by members of the workgroup responsible for the collection's management (Oxum *et al*, 2021; Quiprocó filmes, 2020).

Together, these reflections show that the Nosso Sagrado collection is not only powerful because of its materiality, but because of the stories it activates, the memories it holds, and the futures it makes possible. For the participants in this study, its significance is layered: it speaks of violence and survival, of identity and ancestry, of rupture and continuity.

4.2. Challenges

Discussions surrounding the Nosso Sagrado collection inevitably evoke broader conversations about structural and societal inequalities, as a contested heritage rooted in violence and religious persecution. Participants' reflections were based on their everyday experiences of navigating public spaces, accessing culture and education, and asserting their right to equality and respect.

Four out of five participants in this study live far from Rio de Janeiro's city centre and South Zone, where the Museu da República is located. All participants, however, identified challenges within the specific context of Rio as a metropolitan city, and geographic distance appeared as a significant barrier in accessing the museum. In the words of a participant:

I like this space, I like being at the museum. I just think everything is really far from the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, you know? Most things are either in the South Zone or in the city centre, which makes it harder to get there, right? It ends up costing more, you know? We're farther away, so it's harder to get around (P2).

Participants' reflections echo a broader pattern of spatial inequality in Rio de Janeiro. As Lago (2015, p. 8) argues, this disparity stems from a long history of urban segregation shaped by unequal public investment and real estate interests, which have consistently prioritised central

areas with investments in infrastructure and services, while pushing poor and Black populations to the margins. These dynamics consist of an exclusionary model of urban development that concentrates the resources in the metropolitan nucleus of Rio, producing long-lasting physical and symbolic barriers that continue to limit access to urban resources nowadays (Lago, 2015) – including museums, which remain largely concentrated and maintained in central, more affluent zones of Rio.

Additionally, participants highlighted a striking contradiction in the context of Rio de Janeiro: while the city is profoundly shaped by African heritage (Boaz, 2021, p. 19), it remains an especially hostile environment for practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions. They pointed to the rise of conservative politics and moralising discourses, as well as the lack of consistent governmental support and investment in the valorisation of African heritage, as key factors reinforcing this paradox. According to participants, the absence of proactive cultural policies contributes not only to the ongoing invisibility of Afro-Brazilian traditions, but also to the persistence of racism and religious intolerance in both public and institutional spaces: “The main challenges faced in our community are access to information and the lack of government support for valuing Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous cultures.” (P2). Another interviewee explained:

It's a place that can be very welcoming, but it can also be very challenging. So, it's easy to imagine that people from other cultures who try to practice their sacred traditions, especially those from Afro-Brazilian religions, will face a number of challenges, not only because of religious and racial issues, but also because Rio de Janeiro is an extremely difficult place to adapt to (P4).

In addition, participants described other forms of exclusion experienced within their daily lives. Several noted that Afro-Brazilian religions are still treated unequally in comparison to other religious traditions in Brazil, such as Catholic and Evangelical religions, often facing suspicion, misrepresentation, or explicit hostility. While some acknowledged that public awareness and discourse about African-rooted beliefs have improved in recent years, there was a shared sense that recognition remains fragile and conditional, frequently undermined by political

instability and growing waves of religious conservatism. Within the dialogues, participants noted the need for equal and respectful treatment among all religions. In the words of a participant:

I think there's an important issue here, which is also a constant struggle for epistemic understanding – we are, culturally, raised within a Christian framework. So that becomes the lens through which other religious practices are read and, often, contrasted. I believe there's also a social dimension to this, related to space and to how we interact with people of different faiths, and how religions perceive and make sense of the world (P4).

Another significant point brought up by all participants is unequal access to education and culture, as well as the broader structural deficits within the Brazilian educational system. Participants reflected on how access to different sources of learning reflects and reinforces wider societal disparities. Educational opportunities, they argued, are unequally distributed across lines of class, geography, and race, which in turn shapes whose histories are taught, valued, and legitimised. In the words of a participant: “It’s not obvious for all social classes to have access to culture or to a museum.” (P4).

For participants who work in educational settings, critiques about the national educational system emerged. In their experience, knowledge about Afro-Brazilian history and religiosity, despite being legally mandated through Federal Law 10.639/2003 and later 11.645/2008¹⁶, remains inconsistently taught or openly repressed. They shared frustrations about institutional constraints and the fear of addressing these themes in classrooms. One participant explained:

But you can't talk about certain religions, certain aspects of religion, sometimes even cultural ones. You have to be careful. (...) I work in a primary school, teaching young students, so this is extremely important for their development. And yet, I often feel limited in what I can say. In fact, I don't speak openly about my own religion at school, because I feel there's a kind of persecution. I try to be welcoming, of course, especially to students who follow Afro-Brazilian religions. I always try to support them, to break down misconceptions, and I often intervene to prevent bullying when I see it coming. But it's really hard for me to speak up, because I don't feel that it's a safe environment, you know? And if it's not safe for me, as a teacher, just imagine what it's like for a child (P5).

¹⁶ Federal Law 10.639/2003 (Brasil, 2003) amended Brazil's National Education Guidelines Law (Law 9.394/1996) to make the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture compulsory in basic education. Federal Law 11.645/2008 (Brasil, 2008) expanded this mandate to include Indigenous history and culture.

On the same topic, another participant drew attention to the pedagogic curriculum, which tends to focus solely on topics that appear on external evaluations, such as the ENEM exam¹⁷, leaving many subjects that are essential to critical thinking and personal development aside. They argue, “That’s a bit problematic, right? I also think this has to do with public and private funding... which ends up clashing with mercantilist logic.” (P4). For them, the lack of culturally relevant content and representation in educational settings was seen as a key factor in the persistence of prejudice against Afro-Brazilian religions. As one participant pointed out:

One thing I notice in the community is that there’s also a lack of education. There’s a lack of access to education. Because in many groups I’ve been to, visited, or got to know, these kinds of conversations about representation just don’t happen. They don’t, you know? I think it’s also because prejudice has become so normalised that you don’t even think about representation. You’re already marginalised, and that’s it. (P1).

Additionally, all participants in this study reported having experienced both religious prejudice and racism at some point in their lives. These forms of discrimination were never described as isolated or unrelated; rather, they were understood as deeply entangled. Participants emphasised that religious intolerance and racism operate simultaneously and reinforce one another, particularly because Afro-Brazilian religions are inseparable from the history, identity, and cultural practices of Black communities in Brazil. This dual form of violence appears in their everyday interactions, institutional practices, and public discourse, producing a constant sense of fear, vulnerability, and exclusion: “You’re hardly ever going to find a *terreiro* with a distinctive façade. We’re talking about religious racism here. Everyone knows about these practices, but no one will openly display them for fear of suffering some kind of violence.” (P3).

Therefore, participants understand these forms of violence as manifestations of racialised religious discrimination that take place in multiple forms and settings. They referred to episodes of physical and verbal aggression, the invasion and desecration of places of worship, the destruction

¹⁷ ENEM (Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio) is Brazil’s national high school exam, used for university admissions and educational assessment (Ministerio da Educacao, n.d). Within this context, the participants' criticism refers to how some subjects are only covered in schools by virtue of the exam.

of sacred objects, and other forms of social and territorial pressure that continue to affect their communities in tangible and symbolic ways. In this sense, Boaz (2021) introduces the concept of religious racism to articulate how religious intolerance becomes a means through which racial prejudice is expressed and legitimised. Rather than treating racism and religious discrimination as parallel phenomena, the concept emphasises their interdependence, especially in the Brazilian context, where Afro-Brazilian religions are historically racialised, criminalised, and systematically marginalised. Discrimination against these traditions, Boaz (2021, p. 191) argues, must be situated within the broader framework of racial politics in the 21st century, as it reflects enduring colonial logics about whose culture is considered legitimate, civilised, or worthy of protection. A participant argues:

So, even though it's a city and a society deeply shaped by African heritage, it's also a city profoundly marked by violence, notably and characteristically so. It's very common for people to break in (places of worship), to throw things, to destroy clay objects, and to use fire as well. It's not just about discrediting the physical structure of the place, but also about discrediting it morally. And you can't ignore the fact that this is also a form of racial violence. I think racism is structured in that way too. (P3).

For participants, religious intolerance and racism are not only the cause of structural inequalities, but also of the widespread ignorance and misinformation that continue to shape public perceptions of Afro-Brazilian religions. These traditions are still frequently associated with fear, danger, or moral deviation, narratives sustained by media, politics, and education systems that either silence or distort their meanings. As one participant put it: "It's a group that has been systematically marginalised, so any form of expression is immediately linked to something negative." (P1).

The persistence of these forms of violence, along with the broader challenges faced by practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, underscores the urgent need for action. Participants critically emphasised the importance of improving representation, visibility, and narrative agency. They see the *Nosso Sagrado* collection as a powerful platform for confronting religious racism,

challenging dominant imaginaries, and promoting broader cultural understanding. To summarise, as a participant stated: “It really is important to bring this to light (Nosso Sagrado history). I think it’s a very good thing.” (P2).

4.3. Representation

Among the many concepts discussed throughout this research, representation stood out as one of the most frequently mentioned by all participants. However, it became clear that this word did not carry a single meaning. For some, representation referred to visibility and public acknowledgement; for others, it was more about narrative control, the right to speak from within. Across all interviews, it was expressed as a concern: often urgent, sometimes hopeful, always politically grounded. In this sense, representation emerges as a space of dispute as well: it is a question of who gets to define, narrate, and legitimise Afro-Brazilian religions and heritage in the public sphere.

One of the most consistent critiques raised by participants was directed at how Afro-Brazilian religious traditions have historically been portrayed (or neglected) within Brazilian museums. Although participants in this research relate to museums differently, with some being regular visitors and others visiting more casually when travelling, all of them stated that they appreciate museums and heritage sites and see a lot of potential for education and critical thinking in them. As one participant said: “I think the museum, in particular, has the power to provoke reflection, whether in those who are visiting or in those who are doing the exhibiting as well.” (P4). In relation to bell hooks’ (2003) argument for a democratic education, one that goes beyond formal settings, another participant reflects in a more personal way about the positive impact museums have on their family:

Education can’t be limited to school, right? We have a little boy. So, education can’t be just about school. And my son, also, because he’s autistic, learns a lot through sensory experiences. He spends weeks talking about the museum. He builds a museum at home when he’s playing. So, for us, it’s a way of educating him. A way of teaching, and also of

passing on values. I think that's really important. We're visiting a museum on Thursday, it's a historical site, a former plantation that gives guided tours about slavery. They explain it, they teach, they really give a lesson. And I think that's important for his development as a person (P5).

During the interviews, many aspects of participants' visitor experiences in museums emerged, both positive and negative ones. The first aspect I would like to bring into the discussion refers to their overall experience in museums, where the participants were especially critical of what they perceived as an inadequate or superficial approach to Afro-Brazilian heritage in such spaces. For some of them, especially those who work within educational settings and attend/conduct educational visits to museums, there are limited museums that work with such a theme, of representation (and self-representation) of Afro-Brazilian religiosities. "It's very little, isn't it? It's almost nothing, really." (P5).

On top of that, regarding exhibitions participants had visited with African and Afro-Brazilian related themes, critics emerged in the sense of superficiality of the displays. Participants identified that this is normally accompanied by no proper contextualisation, where relevant objects are interpreted and displayed through technical and ethnographic lenses, often reinforcing and conveying exotic stereotypes within traditional frameworks (Section 3.2). This kind of representation, they argued, often reflects a European-centred gaze that reduces their practices to cultural curiosities or relics of a distant past. In the words of a participant:

I think there are many people who have been researching Candomblé and other Afro-religious practices in Brazil for years. But when it comes to applying that knowledge within museological practice, we often fall back on the same old frameworks. (...) We end up doing a kind of bricolage of other spatial approaches to build an ethnographic exhibition, because I think that's the key we're used to working with, and less an exercise in looking at the semantic and epistemic field and thinking about space from there (P4).

Participants argue that most exhibitions rarely convey the symbolic, spiritual, and political richness of their traditions. Instead, they tend to flatten and depersonalise them, treating sacred items as inert matter, disconnected from the living practices and communities that sustain them. As two participants highlighted, when they visit exhibitions with African and Afro-Brazilian

content in exhibitions, they often perceive an exaggerated focus on the imaginary of slavery and violence rather than a critical approach to history and respect for symbolic and religious meanings. In this sense, the lack of depth in interpretation, the absence of community voices and participation, and the failure to address the complexities of spiritual practice were mentioned as symptoms of broader societal issues, such as racism and prejudice. In their words:

There was one museum I saw that talked about Afro-Brazilian religions, but they're always somehow tied to slavery. I don't often see representations of these religions showing kings and queens, or anything that truly values it... Well, the information about what Africa was, how everything worked there, it's always portrayed with sorrow, with this negative energy, these heavy stories about slavery (...). When they talk about Orixás, it's never in a reverential way, it's always very superficial. I think museums should represent Afro-Brazilian religions with appreciation, showing the positive side, not as something exotic, but as something special that once was and continues to be (P2).

In response, participants advocate for more active and situated forms of representation, where focus is rather on the plurality and richness of Afro-Brazilian belief systems. Central to this demand is the idea that communities should not only be present in exhibitions and other initiatives, but also become active agents in the decision-making around such projects. In this regard, as a means to demonstrate how they feel as museum visitors, several interviewees noted that it is often possible to notice when an exhibition has been developed exclusively through academic or institutional frameworks, without having members of the community engaged:

Yeah, honestly, if the organisation were done by people from the community, you'd be able to tell just by how things were arranged. That alone would already convey so much, it would already carry many messages. But a curatorship that is purely technical loses that spark, it loses the magic (P3).

As community members highly value aspects such as orality and ancestry, they advocate for their community to take agency over their representation. In that sense, all participants said they are excited about the shared management style set for the *Nosso Sagrado* collection, as they feel having representatives of Umbanda and *Camdomblé* involved is not only a great achievement for the two African-rooted religions, but also a way for them to feel secure and represented. Within their arguments is the fact that such participation ensures that exhibitions and cultural

initiatives truly reflect the epistemic perspectives and lived experiences of the community, moving beyond technical or external curatorial approaches towards a more authentic and participatory practice that fully represents them:

The issue of positionality is that sometimes people use it so often it feels cliché, right? But it's really important in this context (...). There's no point in having an Afro-religious exhibition if the people organising it aren't themselves religious practitioners. You need to have religious leaders in decision-making spaces where these people are taking part in these exhibitions. I think the exhibition has to have a participatory aspect to its existence (P4).

Nonetheless, positive examples of museums and cultural sites of Black culture and African heritage representation were also mentioned by participants, such as *Pequena África* (cited by two participants) and *Instituto Pretos Novos*¹⁸ (cited by one participant), both in Rio de Janeiro, and *Museu Afro Brasil*¹⁹ (cited by one participant) in São Paulo. Such places were referenced because of their great accomplishments for the Black and Afro communities, with special attention given to *Pequena África*, a heritage site that encompasses the city's port and the neighbourhoods of *Saúde*, *Gamboa*, and *Santo Cristo*. It is a region where many Africans arrived and settled during the colonial period, becoming a vibrant cultural hub and itinerary that shaped Brazilian music, religion, and traditions (Ferreira, 2023).

Although participants were quite critical of their representations in the public sphere, they argue that they perceive a recent change in terms of greater visibility and initiatives regarding Black history in Rio. Participants argue that they see such themes more often in museums and other activities taking place in the city. Even so, there is an imminent demand for greater

¹⁸ The *Instituto de Pesquisa e Memória Pretos Novos* (IPN), founded in 2005 in Rio de Janeiro's *Gamboa* neighborhood, preserves and researches the *Cemitério dos Pretos Novos*, an archaeological site where newly arrived enslaved Africans were buried between 1769 and 1830 (Instituto Pretos Novos, n.d.). The IPN also promotes Afro-Brazilian culture and history through educational programs, workshops, and community engagement activities (Instituto Pretos Novos, n.d.).

¹⁹ The *Museu Afro Brasil*, founded in 2004 and located in São Paulo's *Ibirapuera* Park, houses over 8.000 artworks and historical objects dedicated to African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture. It offers permanent and temporary exhibitions, educational programs, and cultural activities aimed at fostering awareness and dialogue around Afro-Brazilian identity and heritage (Museu Afro Brasil, n.d.)

promotion of such initiatives, which responds to challenges of awareness and learning around the topic by facilitating what Freire (1970) envisions for education as the practice of freedom:

I think we've made great progress in the way we portray our symbols and what matters to us spiritually. The fact that today Pequena África exists in the centre of Rio de Janeiro as a public heritage site is a victory achieved by our ancestors. It's something sacred to us, something to be celebrated (P4).

Participants' perceptions reflect, therefore, structural dynamics within the museum field, where historically, Afro-Brazilian subjects have been objectified, documented or displayed through frameworks that rarely centre their own worldviews – the history of Nosso Sagrado is a clear example of these dynamics (Chapter 3). Such practices, rooted in colonial and positivist traditions, have long silenced and marginalised the voices of Afro-religious peoples. As ways to mitigate such challenges, several ideas emerged within conversations with participants – exhibitions, workshops and partnerships that would allow greater representation and visibility to the cause, which speaks directly to a desire for a participatory and more inclusive museum (Simon, 2009). In that sense, participants see the Nosso Sagrado collection not only as a response to past silences, but as a powerful tool to reshape public narratives and challenge the symbolic structures that have long sustained exclusion.

4.4. History and Denunciation

Similarly to representation, the concept of history came up repeatedly throughout the interviews. Meanings and actions attributed to it vary, but all participants mentioned the historical significance of Nosso Sagrado as a means to increase awareness, tackle racism and prejudice, and value Afro-Brazilian culture.

Nosso Sagrado collection is recognised by the community as an important part of Brazilian history and as a powerful tool for understanding structural racism and political issues directed at Black people in the country. Participants made special reference to the contestation around it, arguing that it is concrete evidence of how Afro-Brazilian religious traditions have been

systematically violated, criminalised, and silenced over time. A central point of revolt was the way in which the collection was assembled and managed by the Police. Additionally, participants established relationships between the history of the collection with other forms of discrimination and violence that their communities face.

In light of such reflections, participants argued that this history, with all its nuances, must be preserved and (re)told as a form of social awareness and public denunciation. For them, the Nosso Sagrado collection is a political resource that can help society confront the crimes of the past and the structures that continue to shape the present. As stated by a participant: “Because it’s history, it’s a story that deserves respect, you know? There’s symbolism, there’s memory, there’s peoples.” (P1). This emphasis on the collection's history was justified with the aim of mitigating racism and misinformation through denouncing crimes of the past and fostering greater social consciousness, resonating with the process of conscientisation and action described by Freire (1970). As argued by a participant:

And the way to do that is through history – by bringing history forward, by showing what happened, presenting the facts, the truth, so people can become aware of what took place and not repeat it, right? History is really important, really important, because in theory it prevents us from making the same mistakes again. We’ve already lived through that experience, so we don’t repeat it. It stands as a marker, as a story, a lesson, something to study (P2).

Beyond its potential for denunciation, participants also framed the notion of knowing history as something empowering and reaffirming, especially in light of the current status of the collection under shared management. This recent context was often described with a sense of accomplishment and historical reparation, particularly considering the long journey of violence, invisibility, and public pressure that preceded this moment. For some, the transfer of the collection from the Police archives to a museum space co-managed by religious leaders represents a symbolic act of repatriation and a recognition of the value of Afro-Brazilian knowledge systems:

This collection shouldn’t even exist, but it does. And the history of the objects, the way they’ve been treated over the years, exposes a practice that must no longer be tolerated.

It reminds us of a past that isn't even that distant, and that we still need to reflect on more deeply (P3).

Additionally, this connection to memory and ancestry was often expressed as a form of responsibility, to care for what was left behind, to honour those who resisted, and to ensure that their stories are not forgotten:

I think it's the value of recognition and belonging, you know? Of looking at history and seeing that there were people who came before us, who faced even greater challenges than we do. And that our religion persisted, you know? It persisted through a genocide, it resisted politically difficult moments, political persecution. It survived all of that and continues to exist as a space of refuge and recognition, where people like us meet, embrace, and celebrate diversity (P5).

In this regard, museums were often described as institutions with the potential and responsibility to actively engage in processes of historical recognition and transformation. Participants emphasised that museums can be powerful educational tools when they position themselves as agents in the struggle against racism and religious prejudice, particularly by acknowledging difficult histories and amplifying the voices of marginalised communities. Such a role, as discussed in Chapter 3, aligns with decolonial museum practices posed by Whittington (2021) and Unruh (2015), which are grounded in sustained dialogue and meaning-making with traditional communities. Referring to *Nosso Sagrado* and the own nature of the collection as contested, a participant says:

Well, it awakens in me the feeling that something is being repaired, you know? And also this sense that we are going to clarify things – to make it clear that we are not demonic, not evil, not bad people. On the contrary, most terreiros and these religious spaces carry out charity work, serving the community and society. So the proposal behind this collection makes me happy, knowing that there are also people in formal institutions who want to help bring this clarity to the public. That's very good and very special, especially for the young people, who will carry this idea forward, helping to demystify, to break the prejudice, to stop repeating what older generations taught them (P2).

Finally, participants stressed that this history is richly diverse and full of nuances. They called for exhibitions and initiatives that could reflect the plurality of Afro-Brazilian religious expressions, including both traditional and contemporary *terreiros*, and the unique ways these

practices have evolved in Brazil. In this sense, participants described the act of publicly exhibiting and engaging with the collection as effective opportunities to bring to light what has long been hidden, contested or overlooked. As a participant noted: “It’s also a matter of making it known, making public the value these things hold, and making public the violence that was done, that is still being done, bringing it out from under the rug.” (P4). Such aspirations, therefore, resonate with decolonial museum practices, including addressing contested and difficult histories (Hicks, 2020), adapting museum approaches to local contexts (Quijano, 2007), and engaging with traditional communities (Simon, 2009; hooks, 2003; Whittington, 2021).

4.5. Education and Future Uses

Participants voiced a wide range of ideas and hopes for how the *Nosso Sagrado* collection could be used moving forward, especially in ways that centre education, community engagement, and the strengthening of Afro-Brazilian traditions in the public space. While previous sections have explored how the collection is seen as a symbol of memory, resistance, and historical reparation, this final part of the analysis focuses on the ideas and expectations that community members have shared regarding *Nosso Sagrado*'s future uses.

One of the most immediate and unanimous points raised during the interviews was the participants’ interest in seeing *Nosso Sagrado* exhibited to the public. The idea of the objects being on display was often described with excitement, pride, and curiosity. In fact, three interviewees have visited *Museu da República*, while one is unsure whether they visited it, and one participant has not been there yet. Even so, they all expressed that having a public exhibit with *Nosso Sagrado* would prompt them to return to the museum or to visit for the first time. As explained by a participant who lives away from the city centre, they would visit the exhibition “Because I’m part of this community, right? So, especially knowing this history, if someone said,

‘Oh, there’s going to be an exhibition,’ my tiredness would just vanish, I’d be ready to go. Having more spaces of real representativity truly motivates me.’ (P1).

For all participants, this visibility would not only enhance their connection to the Museu da República and Nosso Sagrado collection, but could also spark broader cultural interest, belonging, and conscientisation (Freire, 1970). As participants noted, experiencing such a collection on display would make them curious about what other museums in Rio would be organising and showcasing. For them, seeing themselves represented in such an environment challenges the historical erasure of their traditions, affirms the value of their identity, and inspires them to be even more politically engaged and conscientious. As noted by a participant: “I think it opens your eyes to reflect on things that were hidden away and forgotten in some drawer, you know? And then you start seeking knowledge, knowledge about other things as well. And then you begin to question: what is kept in that other museum?” (P4).

At the same time, participants spoke about a possible issue with public displays, which refers to the hypervisibility of sacred objects. As noted, many sacred items are private to the community, and should not be presented in such exhibitions – in some cases, as noted by two participants, not even religious practitioners are supposed to have contact with them:

I definitely believe that the public exhibition of this collection is important, also as a way to repair the time it was displayed in a criminal way – alongside objects that produced a completely different reading of them. So, I think there is a desire to reconstruct this history, to tell the story differently. This, for sure, places the objects in a position of legitimacy and safety in relation to a wider public, who will be prompted to rethink the narratives around these objects. But I also believe that not everything needs to be shown, because not everything was made to be exhibited. Some things, we know, were never meant to be seen, not even by an initiated person. They were made to remain hidden. The notion of hypervisibility that exists in our culture clashes with the epistemic composition of these religious traditions. There are things one may know, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they can be seen (P3).

Once again, Freire’s (1970) argument that dialogue is a requirement for education and conscientisation comes to light, as participants’ perspectives reiterate the need for active participation of the community in the decision-making process, passing on the traditional

knowledge and expertise they hold so that no such mistakes are made. As argued by participants, showcasing sacred objects and traditions deliberately can potentially contribute to existing stereotypes and imaginaries that harm Afro-Brazilian belief systems. In this regard, during my fieldwork at the Museu da República, it was possible to notice an ethical and respectful treatment towards the collection's management coming from the museum's professionals, who reiterated the guidance they had received from the religious leaders in the workgroup, informing me that many of those objects cannot and will not be displayed publicly. The professionals also emphasised my role as a researcher investigating the Nosso Sagrado collection and ethical approaches to my study.

Together with the desire for a public exhibition of the collection comes the expectation that it will be developed with care, depth, and accountability. Participants argued that showcasing the collection is a great opportunity to build an environment for education, respect, and connection. For them, the exhibition must engage with the history of the collection critically, denounce past and present violence, and foster visibility without reducing their traditions to exotic or static images. As one participant reflected:

I think what would make me feel more welcome in an exhibition with these objects is an explanation. It's about storytelling, you know? About presenting history in a way that's accessible and engaging, so that everyone can understand, not just those who belong to the religion or already have some prior knowledge, but in a way that's accessible to children and adults, and that helps demystify things (P2).

Others emphasised the curatorial responsibility of translating the principles of the shared management into exhibition practices, especially in terms of narrative construction and spatial design. These reflections reinforce that participatory curatorship, already discussed earlier in this analysis, should extend beyond consultation and become a fundamental methodology:

What I'm most curious about is how this shared management between the museum and the Candomblé and Umbanda communities, especially here in Rio, is going to be reflected in the exhibition space. In the storage context, you have more control over access, over how things are displayed, and you can prototype different approaches in terms of safety, handling, and care. But once you move into an exhibition setting, you're

dealing with a different architecture, with broader audiences and more constraints, so it demands a whole other museological approach to narrating the history of these objects. I think it's a fascinating and very delicate process to figure out how to bring these objects back into public view. And it's not a process made only of certainties, it involves tests, negotiations, trial and error. But I would definitely go, because I'm eager to see how this will be done (P3).

The Museu da República was often mentioned with appreciation by participants, some of them referring to their leisure time spent at the museum gardens and outdoor fairs, and some establishing a comparison to the place where Nosso Sagrado was once held (the Police Museum). For many, the fact that Nosso Sagrado is now located in a public museum, historically associated with national memory and political change, represents a symbolic and institutional shift as there is potential to revisit the Republican period through more critical lenses. While there is a general sense of satisfaction with this choice, participants also emphasised that this space, like any other, must remain open to continuous reflection and accountability. In this sense, some participants also spoke about possible contradictions around the Museu da República and the narratives that such a museum can convey, wondering, at the same time, about the possibility of having a museum especially dedicated to the Afro-Brazilian religious themes and safeguarding:

It can also serve as a form of confrontation, a kind of pedagogical confrontation, you know? And it can be something positive, just thinking about it being there. But also... Isn't there perhaps a need for a specific place for this kind of material? Wouldn't it be meaningful to have a dedicated space? Maybe an Afro-religious museum – that would be interesting. But then again, being in the Museu da República can carry many different meanings (P4).

This type of critical engagement highlights the participants' awareness of the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of the collection and their desire to remain actively involved in decisions about its future. Rather than seeing the current institutional arrangement as a fixed endpoint, participants framed it as a step forward, one that demands constant dialogue, openness to change, and collective care:

I think the collection is in a better place than it was before, there's more care, more thoughtful engagement. But I'm not sure it's the final destination. We have to keep asking ourselves whether the institutions we currently have are capable of holding the future we

want. Maybe we need to reinvent new spaces as institutions don't always understand the desires of the future. So even though things are better, we need to keep questioning which spaces are truly prepared to receive this kind of legacy. Nosso Sagrado is just one example among many other collections that deserve similar treatment. It makes me wonder whether we also need to invent new ways of engaging with this material heritage (P3).

Beyond the desire to see Nosso Sagrado on display, participants expressed genuine enthusiasm for broader initiatives that could emerge around the collection. Throughout the interviews, they shared ideas for projects that would help expand public awareness about Afro-Brazilian religions, combat racism and prejudice, and promote collective accessibility, reflection and action. While each participant offered different (and sometimes overlapping) proposals, they all echoed a shared belief in the educational power of the collection, not only within the walls of the museum, but across the city and their everyday spaces. Several interviewees emphasised the importance of bringing the collection closer to communities that have been excluded from such spaces. For a participant, this means imagining Nosso Sagrado as part of itinerant projects/exhibitions, where the museum would facilitate the communities' experiences of the collection, either by bringing the items to afar neighbourhoods or offering sustainable methods of transport to school groups: "The museum should also go to the periphery, also go to the schools." (P1).

Similarly, participants working in education highlighted that, once the exhibition is open to the public, school visits should be encouraged – and ideally become a compulsory visit within the educational curriculum – so that children and young people have the opportunity to engage critically with the collection. Other participants expressed a similar vision, describing how a living and dynamic museum could foster engagement through guided visits, partnerships with local terreiros, and the inclusion of visual resources and presentations, such as theatre pieces, open ceremonies and storytelling sessions as educational tools. They argue: " I think that a museum

focusing on Afro-Brazilian religions wouldn't be like the traditional kind of museum we usually picture, right? Something closed off. It would need to be more alive, more open, you know?" (P5).

This emphasis on expanding outreach also intersected with broader concerns about interdisciplinarity. Two participants argued that the collection has the potential to inspire dialogue across fields such as anthropology, pedagogy, literature, law, and contemporary art. They highlighted that *Nosso Sagrado* should be allowed to generate multiple narratives, perspectives, and resonances. Stressing the importance of a polysemic approach to the collection, a participant said: "Other professionals can also enrich the narrative" (P3). They reinforced this by suggesting projects such as podcasts, books, and editorial publications as a way to reach broader audiences and stimulate new knowledge production around the collection.

The promotion of the collection was also seen as a key initiative to expand public awareness among broader audiences. One participant suggested that posters or materials could be distributed in popular and peripheral areas of Rio de Janeiro, allowing more people to become familiar with the collection and its meaning, especially once it's exhibited at the museum. Another participant spoke about the need for a historical dissemination project, one that could broadly share the history of *Nosso Sagrado*, including on social media.

In line with the desire for broader accessibility and engagement, some participants also stressed the importance of creating safe and participatory spaces for conversations, such as community-led dialogue spaces. Whether held in schools, *terreiros* or public spaces, these gatherings were envisioned as ways to build connection, share experiences and foster mutual understanding. By itself, communication consists of a powerful point of encounter for an education that promotes freedom and resilience, a process that gains further significance when community is at the heart of such a process (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003). All proposals shared within the interviews point to a wider understanding of the collection's potential as a catalyst for

social dialogue and reflect a desire for it to be in constant movement, sparking conversations in both formal and informal environments.

Additionally, some initiatives have already begun to materialise around *Nosso Sagrado*, reinforcing its growing recognition and the collective interest in safeguarding this heritage. In recent years, the collection has been the focus of academic publications, documentary films and public events aimed at fostering reflection and recognition of Afro-Brazilian heritage. During my fieldwork at Museu da República, it was also mentioned that the museum intends to organise a public exhibition of the collection in the future with a plan that aligns closely with the desires and proposals expressed by participants in this research, in their turn represented by the community workgroup. Equally important, during the development of this dissertation, an important research project was launched titled *Acervo Nosso Sagrado: pesquisa, identificação, reconhecimento e gestão participativa de acervo religioso afro-brasileiro* (UNIRIO, 2025), consisting of a partnership between the community workgroup, Iphan, and the *Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro* (UNIRIO). This project aims to reassess the collection's inclusion in Iphan's Book of Archaeological, Ethnographic, and Landscape Heritage, where it was registered under the name "Black Magic" in 1938 (Alves, 2021). Scheduled to run until 2026, the project reflects many of the aspirations voiced by participants, particularly regarding shared management, greater visibility, and the active presence of traditional knowledge in institutional spaces.

The reflections and proposals shared by participants offer insightful answers to the questions guiding this research, and their creativity allows multiple entry points for engagement and decolonial museum practices. Participants' visions position *Nosso Sagrado* collection not only as a symbol of memory and resistance, but also as a living tool for education, dialogue, and transformation. They highlight how engagement with the collection can expand cultural accessibility, challenge structural inequalities, and create meaningful opportunities for critical thinking.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research explored the potential of the *Nosso Sagrado* collection to foster accessibility and critical awareness, while also contributing to social transformation through educational practices in museums. Grounded in a qualitative and interpretivist approach, and informed by the perspectives of Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners in Rio de Janeiro, this research sought to amplify community voices and bring attention to their visions for the collection's present and future uses. While the collection remains inaccessible to the broader public, the insights shared by participants underscore the urgency and possibility of employing it in ways that resist historical violence and promote inclusive, anti-racist, and decolonial museum practices. This final section brings the analysis together to respond directly to each of the research questions, highlighting key insights, tensions, and contributions of the study.

The collection's role in promoting cultural accessibility, fostering critical thinking, and contributing to social change lies primarily in its symbolic, historical and pedagogical power. As a collection that embodies a trajectory of violence, resistance and (re)signification, *Nosso Sagrado* has the potential to operate as a catalyst for awareness, belonging and transformation, provided that it is made accessible in ways that are both meaningful and inclusive. Accessibility here is not only about physical access or exhibition, but also about recognising the collection as part of the cultural and spiritual heritage of Afro-Brazilian communities and the broader Brazilian society. The participants' reflections revealed that awareness of the collection's existence can trigger broader interest in museums and institutional spaces that are otherwise perceived as distant or exclusionary. By acknowledging and amplifying the meanings attributed to the collection by its communities, the Museu da República would therefore contribute to cultural justice.

Additionally, the potential of the collection lies in its capacity to foster critical thinking about Brazilian history and its structural racism. Its history can effectively prompt reflection on

the criminalisation of Afro-Brazilian religions, on the symbolic violence (including that of *musealisation*) and on the colonial logic that continues to shape representations of Black bodies and spiritualities. When these histories are brought to life, they encourage visitors to question institutional narratives and dominant epistemologies, which is in itself an act of transformation and a turning point. In this sense, active involvement with the collection can support what Freire (2005) describes as conscientisation, the process of developing critical consciousness that precedes both personal transformation and collective change. The promotion of such forms of critical engagement, however, depends on how the museum and the workgroup choose to frame, mediate and share the collection.

Community perspectives are essential in informing more inclusive strategies for engaging with and using the collection for educational purposes. Participants brought forward nuanced and creative ideas for how the museum could act as a space of listening and healing, all of them based on their lived experiences. These included co-curated projects and exhibitions, guided tours, partnerships with *terreiros*, visual projects, social media planning, and educational activities that reach areas and audiences still distanced from cultural spaces. Their suggestions also reveal a pressing need for museum education to address the diverse ways in which people learn, once museums have more freedom as non-formal educational spaces. On top of that, participants emphasised the affective and spatial dimensions of learning; being in the museum, connecting emotionally to a sacred object, or hearing stories from community members were all identified as powerful educational experiences.

These reflections also call attention to the importance of the history of the collection as a central component of any future educational engagement. For an empowering and critical learning experience, the contestation around the collection must be addressed by the museum. For the Nosso Sagrado collection and beyond, museums must embrace educational practices that are dialogical, contextual, and accountable to the communities from which collections originated in

the first place. Within this framework, a shift towards a more valorisation-focused approach would be appreciated by the community and could also serve as an inspiration for other museums.

Engagement with the *Nosso Sagrado* collection can effectively contribute to combating racism and religious prejudice when it is framed as part of a broader agenda to promote anti-racist and decolonial practices in museums. The collection alone in the museum's archive does not achieve these goals, rather, it is when its history is acknowledged and its future imagined in collaboration with those it represents that it becomes a powerful platform for institutional change. Participants linked the collection to ongoing forms of violence and marginalisation, and argued that museums have the responsibility to address these issues, both through symbolic recognition and structural commitment and change. This includes challenging epistemic hierarchies, sharing curatorial authority, and confronting the racialised legacies that continue to inform museum practice in Brazil.

The struggle against racism in Brazil is inseparable from the colonial logic that continues to shape knowledge, power, and representation. Addressing racial and religious injustice in museums, therefore, calls for a structural (re)thinking of whose voices are heard, how collections are framed, and what forms of knowledge are legitimised. The community's vision for the future of the collection advocates for a museum that is responsive, responsible, and grounded in dialogue with those it once excluded. Through this, the museum will act as a site of repair, resistance, and shared agency.

This research contributes to a growing field that challenges the role of museums and (re)positions them as active agents in the fight against inequalities. By placing community perspectives at the centre, this study highlights the importance of participatory educational models, the urgency of addressing ongoing colonial legacies, and the transformative potential of contested heritage when engaged with responsibility and care. The findings of this research offer

insights into how community perspectives can be implemented from now on, beyond the case of a sacred Afro-Brazilian collection to other diverse contested heritage housed at museums.

This research can potentially serve as inspiration for other studies about *Nosso Sagrado*, about Museu da República, and about decolonisation in museum spaces, both in and outside Brazil. For instance, while this dissertation included informal conversations and fieldwork in the analysis, further research could include structured interviews with the museum professionals involved in the management of the *Nosso Sagrado* at the Museu da República. Additionally, future studies could examine public reception and feedback once exhibitions and educational programmes are implemented.

At the time I conclude this dissertation, the *Nosso Sagrado* collection remains part of the museum's storage, with limited public access. Nevertheless, its value and potential for Brazilian society are undeniable, and changes and achievements are expected in the near future. This dissertation does not claim to offer a comprehensive or definitive account, but it does make the case that community perspectives are not supplementary to museum practice – they are fundamental and must be treated as so. Finally, I hope this dissertation does justice to the experiences of its participants, to the Afro-Brazilian community in general, and serves as an inspiration and a starting point for what is to come.

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APPENDIX A: FREC'S APPROVAL FOR CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS



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13th May 2025

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance EDUC-2025-00227 Gabriela Araldi

Dear Gabriela Araldi,

With reference to your application EDUC-2025-00227 Gabriela Araldi for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure.**

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Gravina', written over a horizontal line.

Dr Joseph Gravina
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE AND MAIN THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Background and Context

- Could you tell me which area of Rio de Janeiro you currently live in?
- Which community(s) are you representing here, and what does that mean to you?
- Could you share a little about your personal journey within your religion?
- What cultural, social, or spiritual spaces are important to you and your community? Why?
- In your opinion, what are the main challenges currently faced by your community?

2. Connection with museums

- Do you usually visit museums? Why or why not?
- [If applicable:] Based on your experience, do you think museums in Brazil represent Afro-Brazilian religions fairly and respectfully? Why?
- Would you feel comfortable participating in activities organised by museums? What would make you feel welcome or included within those activities?

3. About Nosso Sagrado

- Have you ever visited the Museu da República, located in the Palácio do Catete?
 - [If yes:] Could you tell me about your experience there?
- Have you ever heard of the Nosso Sagrado collection, which is currently housed at the Museu da República?
 - [If yes:] What do you know about this story? What does this collection represent to you?
 - [If not:] Based on the brief explanation and video I'll share with you, what do you think about this collection and what it represents?
- How do you feel knowing that these sacred items are now housed at Museu da República?
- If the items from the *Nosso Sagrado* collection were accessible in an exhibition, do you think that would motivate you to visit the museum — either for the first time or to return? Why?

- What would make you feel more comfortable or welcome in an exhibition focusing on sacred Afro-Brazilian artefacts?
- How do you think an exhibition about the Nosso Sagrado collection could affect your interest (or not) in visiting other museums?

4. Representation, Memory and Future

- Based on your experience and what you know about Nosso Sagrado, what symbolic or spiritual value does this collection hold for you?
- What do you think could be done so that more people from your community become aware of this collection?
- Thinking about the future of the Nosso Sagrado collection, how would you like it to be cared for or used?
- Do you believe this collection could play a role in fighting racism and religious intolerance? In what way?

5. Closing and feedback

- Is there anything you'd like to add or that you feel is important to say that wasn't asked?

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I, Gabriela Araldi ,

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the case of the Nosso Sagrado Collection

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13/08/2025