

Balangandãs, Barangandã, Berenguendens

What does the baiana have? Silk torço, yes she does! Golden earrings, yes she does! Golden chain, yes she does! Pano-da-Costa, yes she does! Golden wristband, yes she does! (...) A golden rosary with a big ball like this... Who doesn't have balangandãs can't go to the Bonfim. The song immortalized by the great Bahian Dorival Caymmi (1914-2008) synthesizes the use of exuberant adornments as the proper feminine essence of the Bahian woman and internationally as the picture of the "Brazilian woman". In a sense, the *balangandã* can be seen as an important [essential] piece of jewelry that incorporates the uses and design of Bahian jewelry.

The term "*balangandã*" (*barangandã*, *berenguendem*) may have a Bantu origin. The Bantu words *bulanganga* ("to swing") or *mbalanganga* ("a hanging piece") may be its roots. Researchers do seem to agree that the term's onomatopoeic characteristics came from the perception of the sound the jewelry makes from the swaying of women's walks when they have them wrapped around their waists: "*balangandam, balangandam...*".

The *balangandã* is a feminine ornament that has holder called "*nave*," made of gold or silver and, often, has figurative engravings with representations of angels, faces, stylized flowers, birds and other ornamental figures joined by a chain (also called "*correntão*" or "*grilhão*" lit. "big chain"). Making use of the top part as support, the bottom is constituted of accessories called "*molhos*" or, imprecisely, "***pencas de balangandã***". These accessories are associated with an infinite amount of significations and symbolic elements. Although the metal *balangandãs* are the most famous (especially those made of silver), the use of ivory, coral reef pieces, wood, stone and other multiple materials also compose the XIX century's Bahian women ornamentation practice.

Analyzing the African jewelry available in museum collections allows researchers to securely establish that the *balangandãs* are a correlative example of "jewelry-amulets" found in many different regions throughout the African continent. Its function and, to some extent, its shape, can be linked back to the models of African spiritual protection jewelry. Although it is a practice that severely declined at the start of the XX century, it is still possible to find imitations and women that wear it to relive the great exuberance of the past. Historically, they were essential decorations for women of the colonial period. Black Bahians (profit slaves or free women) wore them to the celebrations of the Church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim, Conceição da Praia, Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte, São Beneditino, the Holy Ghost, especially during Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and other special occasions. These amulets might also be worn to the exuberant and refined events of black brotherhoods, well organized and affluent groups of men whose work included freeing slave.

The accessories (the hanging pieces are also called “*tetéas*”) of the *balangandãs* are composed of many different pieces that can be of African, European or Brazilian origin. The motives, the shapes and functions vary according to model of the *balangandã* and the personal belief linked to the utilization of this jewel. Generically, it’s possible to identify big categories which are highly symbolic, like the use of fruits, animals, the flora, symbols of catholic or African-brazilian religions, symbols of the popular superstition or exogenous, those that are not necessarily contained within the spiritual context or beliefs, like balls, whistles, dolls, locks, musical instruments, coins and medals, domestic tools, routine objects and many other purely decorative elements.

There are different uses and types of *balangandãs*. Generally, a *balangandã* is used as an amulet that works as a spiritual defense for the user. *Balangandãs* can also be in devotion to an *Orixá* or a catholic Saint. Accessories of such devotional *balangandãs* include, but are not exclusive to, the sword of Saint George that represents the warrior; the little dove that represents the Holy Ghost; or even small crosses and crucifixes. *Votivos* (objects that represent a granted grace); the accessories for which include miniature heads, breasts, feet, legs, hearts; work as “*ex-votos*”.¹ They are figures that serve as ‘proof’ of the existence of ‘medicinal miracles’ and the fulfilled religious promised in the shape of the body part that was afflicted by the disease. The rare also propitiatory *balangandãs*, meaning that they propitiate happiness, good luck, fortune or love. The accessories for *propitiatory balangandãs* include, but are not exclusive to, barrels of agates, a fig sign, alligator teeth, and coins. The last of the different types of *balangandãs* are the *evocative balangandãs*, that represent a happy occurrence or a special memory. The accessories of which include, but are not exclusive to, a bunch of grapes, lavish symbols, drums, personal elements of an affective memory.

It is certain that the stylistic tradition of this creole jewelry deserves a special study, but the symbolic point of view of the *balangandã* is what catches the most attention, given its variety and often times individuality and subjective belief. Among the most common representations of these amulets and many of those known outside of the Bahian context, there are: the fig sign, as an element of good luck and a piece against evil eye; the coin as fortune; the rooster is the vigilance [watcher], as a catholic symbol that announces the day, and, symbolically the birth of Christ – such is the meaning of the *Misa de Gallo*, conducted by the Pope the day before Christmas; the pomegranate as a symbol of fertility and prosperity; the spider as temptation; the clover as the conjugal happiness; the moon as a symbol for Saint George (*Oxum* or *Oxóssi*,

¹ “*Ex-voto*” is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase *ex-voto suscepto*, which means “*from the made vow*”

in Bahia); the pig as a symbol for Saint Anthony (*Xangô*); the dog, as Saint Lazarus of Bethany (*Omolu*); the moringa as Saint Cosmas and Damian; the heart, passion; the joined hands are a symbol of friendship; the horn is used against envy; the paddle is a symbol for *Naná*; the horseshoe is the sign of happiness. The *balangandãs* are the soul that clearly shows the sensibility and the abundance of variety contained in the design of these African-Brazilian jewels, at the base of its various significations, contains the fascinating universe of the ancestors' life forces, the real guardians of the Axé.

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