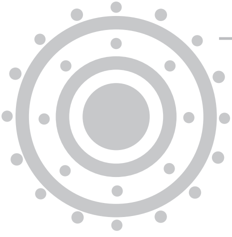

Introduction

As an analytical field, the study of so-called Afro-Brazilian[1] religions—and of Candomblé in particular—has traditionally privileged cultural contents and their specificities in addition to the search for their origins. Continuous allusion to Africa and the unceasing search for Africanisms (begun at the start of the nineteenth century with Nina Rodrigues) have taken on various forms, from the simple, mechanical comparison of cultural traits whose resemblance to African counterparts is presented as proof of "survivals" (Rodrigues, 1935, 1977; Ramos, 1951, 1961) all the way to studies that attempt to present the persistence of cultural traits as part of a functional, alternative African religious system (Herskovits, 1967; Ribeiro, 1952) or even as the expression of truly African thought (Bastide, 1971, 1978; Santos, 1976).

It is from this search for Africa that appreciation for the purity of Candomblé emerges. Simultaneously, Nagô tradition[2] is elevated to the height of Africanness and presented as a model cult of resistance in which the upholding of African tradition and values enables an alternative form of being, if not at the level of economic and political relations then at least at the ideological level. This is what Roger Bastide's "principle of scission" proposes—to explain how blacks who became part of capitalist society's labor force possessed an ideological autonomy guaranteed by religious participation in groups of African origin, guardians of a cultural repertory and thought that allude to Africa (Bastide, 1971).

In characterizing Candomblé *terreiros*—above all the purest ones—as havens of Africanness and resistance, authors who adopt this methodological stance implicitly accept that the presence in Brazil of cultural traits that originated in Africa necessarily indicates black resistance. The authentic transformation of Africanisms into proofs of resistance signals acceptance of the given that the meaning of cultural traits is determined through origin, without considering the fact that, whether real or supposedly of African origin, cultural traits may have different meanings in Brazilian society. Not taking this into due consideration leads to a search for Africa within Brazil, and the Nagô model emerges from this inces-

sant search based on empirical data regarding Bahian *terreiros*[3] in which Nagô persists in its "purest" form, said model having been transformed into an analytical category by scholars who, significantly, privilege the most traditional *terreiros* as a field of study.

In dealing with other *terreiros*, the "purest" Nagô is always used as a reference. Inasmuch as they depart from the model, Umbanda, Macumba, and *Caboclo* and Angola Candomblés are considered "degenerate" and "distorted" from this perspective, "less interesting religious survivals"—an assessment that permeates work extending from Nina Rodrigues at the end of the nineteenth century to Roger Bastide in more recent years.

What underlies this logic is that the "pure Nagô" model, which truly represents a continuation of African cultural institutions that were transplanted here and preserved thanks to black collective memory, faithfully reproduced their origins and meanings, thus becoming signs of resistance. In compensation, those who blended with other traditions, degenerating from their original purity, became more integrated. Obviously, integration and resistance came to be judged by degrees of "purity" as defined by cultural traits that were found in the *terreiros* and considered African.

Forsaking this methodological position and gathering clues from research by Yvonne Velho, Peter Fry, and Patrícia Birman (Velho, 1975; Fry, 1977a; Birman, 1980), I became interested in trying to understand the meaning of this obstinate search for Africa and, in particular, the glorification of the "purest Nagô" tradition by an entire school of intellectuals. But I am also interested in examining the problem from another perspective—those who identify themselves as being of African (and specifically of Nagô) descent, and who present fidelity to Africa as a distinctive sign of self-identity.

My analysis attempts to introduce an aspect that has been somehow ignored in studies of Candomblé, to wit: its organizational dimension within the sociocultural and political context of society at large.

As long as the search for Africa was the basic purpose of research on Afro-Brazilian religions, culture was privileged and conceived of as an objective entity, a determinant element in the identification of cults with certain ethnic traditions that, transplanted to Brazil, adapted and perpetuated themselves as best they could in accordance with mechanisms of acculturation. In this type of analysis, culture appears as an autonomous system and the global society in which interethnic contacts and cultural contacts develop is ignored. Even Melville Herskovits—who proposed to study Candomblé as a whole, focusing on aspects of social and economic

organization beyond the merely religious (Herskovits, 1967)—somehow isolates the religious unit from the broader context of Brazilian society or considers this relationship only insofar as it concerns syncretism. In attempting to understand black religions as an alternative system, "a subculture which integrates the matrix of general Brazilian culture" (Herskovits, 1954), he emphasizes the idea of a continuity of African tradition even as his perspective is restricted to the cultural level.

In criticizing Anthropology (and culturalists particularly) for treating culture as something abstract that hovers above sociological context, Roger Bastide proposes to study the social conditions of Afro-Brazilian religions. From his perspective, the maintenance of these religious forms should be researched in connection with the dual structure of society, for the "struggle of civilizations is only an aspect of the racial or economic class struggle" (Bastide, 1971: 96).

Thus it would be appropriate to analyze the role of "African" actors who are bearers (according to Roger Bastide) of a pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy within this context in which their interests as dominated groups were antagonistic to the interests of the dominants. However, while it may be true that the interests of structurally inferior black groups appear in the analysis of the historical evolution of religions—explaining, for example, the disappearance of African gods of agriculture who were not worshipped in Brazil and, in compensation, the importance assigned to warrior gods such as Ogum (Bastide, 1971: 97), or even the fact that Candomblé represents a center of support and integration for unprotected post-abolition blacks—on the whole, the author's analysis eventually dilutes the interests of the dominated groups in myriad factors, such as the solidarity between masters and slaves, and, after the abolition, introduces the so-called "principle of scission" to explain why blacks continue to be African even as they are Brazilian. He concludes that Candomblé and other types of African religions have resisted every manner of structural chaos, always finding a way to adapt to new living conditions or new social structures (Bastide, 1971: 236–40), thus inducing the reader to believe that, ultimately, Candomblé endured through African civilization's intrinsic capacity for self-perpetuation.

Authors such as Abner Cohen and Frederick Barth (Cohen, 1969; Barth, 1969) view the relationship between ethnicity and culture from a different perspective, changing the focus from the ethnicity of cultural contents to analysis of the group.

Discarding the traditional view in which ethnicity corresponds to a cultural unit maintained in social and/or geographic isolation, Frederick

Barth sees the ethnic group as a form of social organization in which there is an emphasis on interaction. In spite of this, the group is not diluted, for it maintains an organized complex of behaviors and relationships that mark the ethnic boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders." In the construction and management of these boundaries, cultural traits are used as differential markers; yet only some of these differences are considered significant by the actors, not the sum total of differences. The central focus of the investigation is the "ethnic boundary which defines the group and not the cultural material it contains" (Barth, 1969: 15).

Abner Cohen considers ethnic groups to be interest groups that manipulate part of their traditional culture as a means of articulating their search for power. Thus, prior to being a cultural phenomenon, ethnicity is regarded as an essentially political phenomenon in which norms, values, and myths are related and used to express organizational functions, operating within a current political context rather than an archaic surviving arrangement undertaken in the present by a conservative people (Cohen, 1969).

For both authors, culture becomes an arsenal generally used to establish distinctions rather than the defining element of ethnicity, which implies a situation of otherness—an affirmation in the presence of others.

From this perspective, contact with others leads to the exacerbation of certain traits of cultural tradition that become diacritical; thus, the original culture (or part of it) takes on a new function: that of marking differences. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha presents the significant example of the Nagô who returned to Brazil from Lagos, Nigeria, in the nineteenth century. Here, they identify themselves as Brazilians, using Catholicism (as opposed to Protestantism, Islamism, and animism) as a basic diacritical sign intensified by other cultural traits, some of which are regarded in Brazil as African (culinary and ritual) and which they present as Brazilian, the better to mark their identity (Cunha, 1977).

This and many other examples lead to the conclusion that ethnicity cannot be defined by culture alone, since culture can be manipulated by the group that, moved by its interests, seeks a space of its own or attempts resistance. If such a position may be criticized for reducing culture to practical interests and reasons (Sahlins, 1979) or, more specifically in the context of ethnicity, to something that "is not posed, but only opposed" (Cunha, 1979), one might well ask to what measure these interests are, themselves, culturally defined. I do not propose to investigate such an in-

tricate theoretical problem, one that Marshall Sahlins locates as the axis of the anthropological debate ever since its origins (Sahlins, 1979).

Rather, I propose to question the validity of comparisons between the cultural repertories of Afro-Brazilian religions, and cultures submitted to different historical and social processes, and to analyze the use of symbols by different social groups; my basis for doing so is the "glorification of the Nagô" undertaken by a chain of intellectuals and by a religious group self-identified as such.

The methodology I have adopted attempts to reflect upon certain aspects of Candomblé's multifaceted reality, aspects that remain unintelligible if analyzed only according to culturalist comparativism. In this regard, my own research experience is significant. When I began my study of the "pure Nagô" *terreiros*, attempting to focus on the historical, economic, organizational, and ritual aspects of a religious center located within a specific social setting (Dantas, 1976a), the insistence with which group members returned to the discourse on the "pure Nagô" in order to attest to their continuity with Africa led me to an analysis of the cultural contents presented as signs of this "African purity" and its comparison with the Nagô Candomblé of Bahia, regarded as the most vigorous African haven in Brazil. The result was disconcerting, for in many aspects there was flagrant disagreement as to the composition of this African heritage. It was understood that there were differences between Africa and Brazil; after all, significant historical and structural differences had been pointed out by Roger Bastide in his examination of the process of interpenetration of civilizations through the persistence of African religions in Brazil (Bastide, 1971).

But how to explain such drastic modifications in the cultural content of Nagô groups in two neighboring northeastern states? To present a cultural content dissimilar to the one found in the "purest" Nagô Candomblé *terreiros* of Bahia as "pure Nagô" tradition was surely an idiosyncrasy of the *terreiro* studied. Thus I resorted to the bibliography on the Xangôs,[4] regarded as the most Africanized in Recife; nevertheless, I remained perplexed. The conclusion appeared to be that there were also differences in the cultural repertories of other "purest Nagô *terreiros*" in the Northeast, differences that, in some cases, involved elements considered central to the religious groups' belief and value systems, such as forms of proselytizing.

In light of this, I began to rethink "Nagô purity" and realize that cultural features called upon to certify it are selected and combined in different ways so as to establish contrasts, and furthermore that, like words,

their meanings allow for polysemy and are defined by the social context of the present and in the relationship of forces that involve the structurally superior and inferior.

My field of observation was the Afro-Brazilian segment of Laranjeiras, a small city in Recife's sugar-producing zone and, in particular, a *terreiro* self-identified and recognized by others as "pure Nagô."

From 1970 to 1976, I followed the life of this *terreiro* closely—its rituals, its routine, the *mãe-de-santo*'s relationship with other *terreiros* and with different segments of society at large. The group's acceptance of my presence was facilitated by my previous work on the Taieira, a ritual organized by the *mãe-de-santo* and presented within the Catholic context of the festival of São Benedito. Through it, I became acquainted with many members of the *terreiros* and enjoyed the *mãe-de-santo*'s friendship. One day, she suggested I write a book about the Xangô. This coincided with an idea I had been entertaining for quite some time. I then began to frequent the house with the stated intention of studying the Xangô, in order to write a book as I had done with the Taieira.

To be the focus of a book, to see her name in print and her photograph published as director of the Taieira, was certainly a gratifying experience for the *mãe-de-santo*. Although she let me know that, by making public knowledge what had previously been hers alone, the book had deprived her of a monopoly on information regarding the Taieira, it was obvious that it had been instrumental in raising her status. The idea that I would write a book about the Xangô gave her the possibility of improving that status and increasing her prestige, as well as the opportunity to initiate a new cycle of exchanges in which information regarding the Xangô was repaid with small favors, contributions to the rituals and constant visits that eventually contribute to a *mãe-de-santo*'s position and religious status and that of her religious group. I was aware of the researcher-observer's interference in the lives of those observed and I realized how my own presence in the *terreiros* played into the game of assessing the prestige of houses of worship, and so I interpreted the attempted intensification of my link to the group as a strategy through which to prolong this presence. Its members insistently admonished me against "going from *terreiros* to *terreiros*," arguing that it was "risky for the *senhora* to be walking around these Torés, for *torezeiros* are evil and something bad could happen to you." A behavioral pattern that is part of the group members' code of ethics was thus transferred to the researcher, under the allegation that I was "almost a Nagô." On several occasions, the *mãe-de-santo* warned

me: "You have *santo*" or "You are protected by a very strong *santo*," a statement that implied the idea that this protection might be greater if I worshipped it appropriately. However, the proposition remained unspoken. There were clear attempts to get me to establish closer links to the *terreiro*'s life, if not through the *baptism* that would determine my saint, then at least through the establishment of ritual kinship by way of the substitute *mãe-de-santo*'s sponsorship. To be sure, the invitation to serve as godmother when the latter was solemnly invested as group leader was not presented as a mere courtesy, but as a revelation by the deceased *mãe-de-santo* who appeared in a dream to transmit it. Establishing a closer tie between researcher and religious group was not only a means of assuring her presence in the *terreiros* for a longer time, but also of further guaranteeing support by people from the middle class who had relative access to certain institutional sectors. It ultimately meant expanding the group's network of social relations beyond the lower class from which it generally recruited its members, with all of the possible attendant advantages.

When I left to pursue my master's degree in Campinas (1978–1979), although I continued to keep up with the most significant events in the *terreiro*'s life and sent them news of myself, I distanced myself physically from the group. The distance left me more at ease, when I returned to the field, to visit other *terreiros* in regard to which my mobility had, in a way, been restricted because, even though my presence in the Nagô *terreiros* was quite frequent, its expectation was that I, too, respect the boundaries between it and "the others." For some time I had been keeping up with the other *terreiros*' events (and particularly their relations with the Nagô) from a distance, but only now did I feel comfortable visiting them, thus extending my field of observation that I might see how the local Afro-Brazilian group configured itself, the *terreiros*' emic[5] criteria of classification and of attributing status, and the relationship between them and society at large. Chapter 1 is, therefore, a map of the Afro-Brazilian field in Laranjeiras and, in its specificity, an arid, albeit necessary background for the study of the Nagô. This is because ethnicity is a relational concept, and as such becomes operative only through the presence of others with whom the Nagô will dispute adepts and clients in the market of symbolic goods.

In the next two chapters, Nagô talks about itself and others. In chapter 2, based on the *mãe-de-santo*'s representations of herself and of her *terreiros*, I attempt to understand how she seeks to legitimize herself through Africa, to which she is linked by her origins (the "history" of

the *terreiros* and the genealogy of their leaders) and by a cultural heritage preserved without "mixture," which would be the mark of her distinction in local Afro-Brazilian groups.

In chapter 3, based on the Nagô *mãe-de-santo*'s representations of other *terreiros* and of the Catholic religion, I return to the Nagô-Toré and pure-mixed dichotomies outlined in chapter 1 in order to analyze the categories underlying this schema of classification (African-Indian and good-evil) and show how the outlines of purity and mixture follow the principles of the dominant and subaltern classes within the social structure through an arrangement (that does not degenerate Nagô purity) with the Catholic Church.

The title of chapter 4 is "The Construction and Meaning of Nagô Purity." In it, I expand my field of analysis, seeking to show that Nagô purity does not result from fidelity to a tradition, but from a construction in which intellectuals play an important role. From this perspective, fidelity to Africa is presented as a distinctive sign of the Northeast and a component of 1930s regionalism. I also show how "pure Nagô" is transformed from sorcery into a "true religion," albeit one that is permeated with exotic-primitive-aesthetic aspects and, also, how in Candomblé's transit from a target of police persecution to glorified Nagô Candomblé, pure Nagô is used as a symbol of the Brazilian nation and cultural democracy.

In the last chapter, I once again restrict my field of analysis to the Nagô of Laranjeiras in order to verify how the intellectual movement of African glorification discussed in the previous chapter is reflected in a small northeastern town and how—having exclusively guaranteed the purest African origin—the Nagô *terreiro* uses it as a survival strategy in the competitive symbolic goods market.