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Ritual languages of African origin: marks of identity and focus of resistance

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Introduction

The project entitled “Linguistic intolerance towards blacks and forms of resistance” is developed along two lines: the first investigates when and how linguistic prejudice against Brazilian black Portuguese speakers originated, through the identification of intolerance, manifested in behaviour and discourse. The second attempts to characterize forms of resistance from the blacks as Portuguese speakers who have inherited the African languages brought to Brazil. Illustrated newspapers published in the 19th century are the main empirical material for the development of the first aim. The language spoken in rural black communities, present-day quilombos, and the description of African languages in rituals called “African-Brazilian” make up the basic data for the investigation of forms of resistance. The theme of this study – Ritual languages of African origin: marks of identity and focus of resistance – deals, therefore, with the reaction to intolerance and prejudice towards the Black Speech and African languages. Before placing African religions in the Brazilian religious universe, one should be aware of the great diversity of religions and sects in Brazil. This can be seen in the last census (2000) which also indicates a change in terms of the decrease in the number of followers of traditional Catholicism and their dispersion into other religions. Statistical data presented below comparing the three last censuses draw attention to the increase in the percentage of followers of certain religions; first Protestantism (mostly Pentecostal Evangelicals) [6.6/9.0/15.4 – see table below], followed by Spiritists [0.7/1.1/1.4] and, in an opposite direction, the decrease of African-Brazilian cult practitioners [0.6/0.4/0.3].

	1980	1991	2000			
CATHOLICS	89.2	83.3	73.7			
PROTESTANTS	6.6	9.0	15.4			
SPIRITISTS	0.7	1.1	1.4			
AFRICAN-BRAZILIAN CULTS	0.6	(0.57)	0.4	(0.44)	0.3	(0.34)
OTHER RELIGIONS	1.3	1.4	1.8			
NO RELIGION	1.6	4.8	7.3			
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%			

(source: IBGE - Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics-, demographic census, apud Pierucci, 2004:25) However, we should observe this information carefully, considering that not all practitioners identified themselves because they are still marked by stigma and prejudice from the past. We know that, in the 19th century, Catholicism was the only religion accepted in Brazil; it was the official religion and the only one endowed with social legitimacy. To live in the country, even for

a slave and especially after the abolition of slavery, it was mandatory to be Catholic. A specification of this statistical data shows us that in the Northeast of Brazil, where the traditional African religion developed, there are few followers of these cults. It confirms the interpretation that these data are not totally reliable, although it reflects many of the followers' perceptions: it's not a religion, it's a practice, a sect, that can coexist with another religious practice. In the South and Southeast of Brazil, where the African religion arrived more recently, in the 20th century, and the religious change has been greater, and the number of followers identified is higher (Prandi, 2004:225). Other data identifying these African-Brazilian cults reveal an interesting fact: Candomblé started to compete with Umbanda in the 60s, already entering the "religious market". In this market, Umbanda, a religion formed in Rio de Janeiro, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, mixing African and Indian cults and Allan Kardec's Spiritism, was soon called the "Brazilian religion" par excellence. The table below presents specific data on Umbanda and Candomblé, which was possible from 1991 on, when IBGE – Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics started to make a distinction between both religions (Pierucci, 2004: 25).

Religion	1991	2000	Change
Umbanda	542,000	432,000	20.2% loss
Candomblé	107,000	140,000	31.3% growth

(in this period, the Brazilian population growth rate was 15.7%)

II – The so-called "African-Brazilian" cults Today these cults are known by different names: In Bahia, where they appeared in the 19th century (Ilê Axé Yá Nassô Oká, was the first terreiro, founded in 1830) they are identified as Candomblé. This cult has received a number of names in different regions: xangô (Pernambuco); tambor-de-mina (Maranhão); batuque (Rio Grande do Sul). Until the middle of the 20th century, these cults were a kind of cultural resistance, initially made up of Africans, and later, descendants of Africans, which resisted slavery and to the mechanisms of domination of white Christian society, which marginalized the blacks and those of mixed race, even after the abolition of slavery. Roger Bastide (1945, 1971, 1973) analyzed them as religions which preserved the ethnic legacy of slaves descendants. According to Prandi (2004), the growing presence of white people changed them into a universal religion: these religions changed into organizations of a specific religious cult, with no ethnical, racial, geographical and social strings attached. They then quickly entered in the religious market, competing with other religions. Candomblé and Umbanda are religions of small groups that gather together around a mãe or pai-de-santo³. Each of these groups is called terreiro – a group with family characteristics, constituting a família-de-santo, with religious relationship and founded on obedience to the principles of their nation. Its pantheon is essentially African and there is the predomination of African-Catholic syncretism, with sacrificial practice and ceremonies of possession, during which music has an important role. The terreiro is a political, mythical and religious site, where African symbolic heritage and their 'descendants' will be transmitted and preserved. The terreiro is the site of "reterritorialization" of a broken culture, an exiled culture. This is the place where one goes to revive and try to reconstitute one's family and clan, which, as in Africa, are formed regardless of blood bonds. There, one looks for a sense of belonging to a collectivity and, in a ritualistic way, finds one's own nation (Muniz Sodré, 1988: 50). Guimarães (1990) concludes that a terreiro was and still is a 'quilombo', despite the growing participation of white people, because it is a place of freedom for the blacks, like the present-day and past quilombos⁵, which allow the basic elements for the preservation of the blacks as a group and as a culture to come together.

III – Syncretism African religion is linked to the

concept of syncretism in Brazil, a country made up of a number of cultures. The concepts of blend, confusion and conciliation seem to be a central aspect of the Brazilian dominant ideology. Many authors have interpreted syncretism, criticizing it or showing how it can be surpassed. For Nina Rodrigues (1935) for whom syncretism represented an "illusion of catechism". Bastide (1945) rejects the concept and rather considers it as a reinterpretation, in which similarity and correspondences would be observed, but never fused. His disciples loathe syncretism in benefit of "African purity". Peter Fry (1984) explained that the ideas of purity, blend, and syncretism are always essentially social constructions that tend to disappear during disputes over power and hegemony. Muniz Sodré (1988) says that there is no syncretism: the association of Catholic saints with orishas proves that black people respected and reduced the differences thanks to the analogy of symbols and functions. Ferretti (1999) associates syncretism with resistance. He asserts that syncretism is very present in popular religiosity and in African-Brazilian religions. It is a way of connecting African traditions to Catholic ones. In Casa de Minas, a very traditional and syncretic terreiro, there are no rigid boundaries between syncretism, tradition and black identity. The voodooos of Casa de Minas call themselves devotees of Catholic saints, though the presence of black culture is quite obvious. Reginaldo Prandi (1999) identifies three phases in the history of African-Brazilian religions: (i) an initial period of syncretism; (ii) a whitening phase, with the formation of Umbanda, between 1920-1930 and (iii) Africanization, from 1960 on, with the transformation of Candomblé into a universal religion. Umbanda is, perhaps, the most syncretic religion. Mary Karash (2000) shows the importance of the Central-Western African regions, the Congo and Angola for the formation of Umbanda. In her study on the importance of Bantu culture in Rio de Janeiro, she says: "most Africans came from the Central-Western African regions, during the first half of the 19th century. Contemporary Umbanda, as it is found in Rio, is based on healing religions of Angola. The most important religious traditions, prior to 1850, did not come from Nigeria, nor Dahomey (now Benin), but from the African region which lies to the south of the equator" (2000:354).

IV – Languages of Candomblé

The African languages spoken nowadays are mainly kept as a form of expression in chants, greetings and names of those who have been initiated. They can also be a means of communication between the followers of the same community of cults. Most of them are pidgins, whose lexicon and grammar have become distant from their original African language. Their acquisition is exclusively reserved for the initiated. This is called *língua-de-santo*. The supreme authority is the *mãe-de-santo* or *pai-de-santo*, recognized as: Rumbondo/Rumbono – Jeje-Mina nations (Ewe-fofon language) Ialorixá/Babalorixá – Nagô-Queto nations (Yoruba language) Mameto (Nêngua)/Tata – Congo-Angola nations (Bantu language) The deities or saints are known as: Voodooos (Jeje-Mina) Orisha (Nagô-Queto) Inquice (Congo-Angola) The inherited words show the social and religious organization of the group, the sacred objects, the ritual food, the greetings, the expressions related to creeds, specific habits, liturgical ceremonies and rites. In liturgical chants we can find complete statements in "African languages" or in incomprehensible languages, whose mixture can even include Portuguese. Between 1850 and 1860, when the slavery was finishing, and the traffic of slaves was clandestine, thousands of Yoruba men and women from Gulf of Benin, on the West Coast of Africa, arrived in Bahia, Recife and Rio de Janeiro. From the first decades of the 19th century, terreiros were organized in Salvador, São Luís do Maranhão, and probably in Recife and Rio de Janeiro. The authors described the religion of the Nagô

nation, which speaks Yoruba, and Jeje, of the Fon language, as if they were the same language. And they defined as “Jeje-Nagô nation”, joining into one group the Eve and Fon language nations, called Jeje, and the Nagô nation, a designation of the Yoruba people who came from Benin. In Brazil, the name Nagô identifies the Yoruba peoples and their language (língua-de-santo). Nagô/ànàgó used to designate the Yoruba populations on the border between Nigeria and Benin, or spread into the countryside. This was also the name by which the Eve and Fon peoples knew the Yoruba people.

V – The preservation of the language Since the beginning of the 20th century, the followers of Nagô nation cults have not spoken Yoruba everyday, and this is why they fight to keep the words of the chants intact. These efforts to prevent the disappearance of the collective memory imply the development of ritual mechanisms and social etiquette to activate the memory and prevent it from being forgotten. To preserve the language, the pais-de-santo rigorously observe the way the members of their terreiro sing. The extent of preservation of the African language in chants and invocations is the sign of a terreiro which have the power of orishas. According to Carvalho (2003), a number of preservation mechanisms will be used: (i) the first important mnemonic procedure is the prohibition of whistling, since the orisha Ossayin does not like it, so, it is necessary to sing all the time; (ii) one should always sing all the words, paying attention so that the chant and the lyrics are always in harmony; (iii) finally, Carvalho considers that the believers’ devotion is the most important guarantee for preservation. Besides these factors, the situation of specialized, ritual use through which one tried to preserve one’s identity through the interaction of one’s language and Portuguese was important for the preservation of the African language(s). Despite the more extensive use of Portuguese in the cults, there are still words that will always be said in African languages, such as names of deities, animals, food, clothing and symbols.

VII – Orality and writing The way of transmission of ritual languages used to be and still is orality. Nina Rodrigues (end of 19th Century) says that many chants were spread in written form, but only for educated people, since the followers of cults learned and transmitted their religious practices orally. The few recent translations into Portuguese were made by scholars, some of them followers of the cults. Carvalho (2003) noticed that oral transmission preserved the African chants almost intact, because, despite various versions of the same chant, there are many similarities between the chants found in different places of the New World, such as in Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago.

VIII – The languages spoken by people from different cults In Umbanda, there is a syncretism between the cult of the dead and ancestors, reinterpreted by the Kardecist Spiritism as mediumship, and Catholic or Indian elements, the latter called caboclos. The spirits which are incarnated are of deceased people, ancestors, black people, autochthon or purified Indians and also undeveloped spirits and evil spirits (pombagiras). In the Preto Velho rituals (Bonvini 2000), an incomprehensible language is one of the stereotypes of Umbanda followers. It is a guarantee of the secrecy of the language, the authenticity of its messages and also its identity value. Let us analyze the data collected in Rio de Janeiro and in its outskirts between the years of 1985 and 1993 (Bonvini, op.cit.): Exi nangolaÁ ’ “we in Angola” Exi jifazi muito sofedô “we suffer a lot” Ji foi maraduÁ “we were tied” Feto jibixu “like animals” In Candomblé Nagô, Nagô-Quetu, Jeje and Jeje-Nagô, Portuguese is the language used for communication, with insertions of African words - Yoruba, fon, eve (jeje) – more or less complex according to its interlocutors (their initiation level) but always respecting its hierarchy: the senior followers use the “African language” more frequently as they believe the secret will be kept by using it:

“the followers of a certain nation speak the language of that nation”. It is, in fact, an African language which was adapted to the phonology of Brazilian Portuguese, as nonexistent linguistic traces in Portuguese were lost, such as tones, which were assimilated to accents, and some sounds, such as [kp, gb] which were reinterpreted and changed to [p, b]. The African language spoken in Candomblé Angola has similar features to the one spoken in Candomblé Nagô. The difference is that the former includes lexicons of the Bantu language, although it also has lots of Nagô and Jeje words. As well as in Candomblé Nagô, in Candomblé Angola whole prayers in the “African language” can be found, such as the following, said at the Gong party, an annual ceremony which takes place on Dia de São João , to reinforce the energy field of the house and to prepare the pemba which will be used the whole year. Azuelê katu de dandaluna Azuelê katu de mala Losange kaia Isange diamukanguê ê Kedundunkaia lokaia diamundelê Asutenda auê IX – Language ritual, resistance and the Black Movements Portuguese is the most commonly spoken language in the African cult communities, as they try to keep the African languages as a sacred link to unite the followers and to establish communication with the supernatural entities. While the conception of the nation is supported by the use of a dominant linguistic form, the language identifies its followers by creating an identity which is not unilingual, seeing that a number of African languages, among the many spoken by the black slaves deported to Brazil, coexist in different religions. Candomblé Nagô is the one which has greater visibility – it has innumerable terreiros, is the oldest and the most widely known, as it is frequently mentioned in popular music. Its claimed supremacy in relation to the others – seeing that the Yoruba/Nagô language is also present in other nations – is not confirmed: Candomblé Nagô is also characterized by a linguistic mixture, having Bantu linguistic elements, showing that there is a reciprocal influence between among all Candomblé communities. In fact, the different nations do not make up a monolithic block, but rather a continuous one, in which not only the language but also the ritual elements should be seen as a double syncretism: (i) Afro-Catholic, is the best-known and most widely studied and (ii) Afro-African, the most complex and maybe, the most meaningful. (Vatin, 2004:14-24) The present-day black movements, noticing the cultural importance and strength of the African religions which have withstood intolerance, have revised their strategies and placed high value on the Afro-Brazilian cults, adopting their set of practices, in search of an African identity, marked by the “language” of the nation spoken in the terreiros. In this perspective, we cite the MonaBANTU, BANTU-Nation National Movement, an autonomous organization composed of communities and Bantu-culture resistance centers in Brazil, which “intends to be a political forum to discuss, elaborate and deliberate on issues concerning the fight against discrimination, gender oppression and religious intolerance, seeking compensation for the Bantu nation” (the statute of the movement). From May 13th to 15th, 2005, the first National Congress – Traditional Communities and Potential Living Centers was held in Osasco, São Paulo. At this meeting, the participants discussed the role of the black people in the Brazilian society and decided to set up a national movement (MonaBANTU), considering the participation of African religions, as far as African culture resistance centers are concerned, the most important issue. The Congress established that the Bantu community members in Brazil should meet every three years, with the participation of two representatives per state and, at least one member of the terreiro community or the umbanda terreiro. In São Paulo, the movement is linked to Candomblé Angola and to Mameto Loabá terreiro, the oldest in

the state. In its declaration of principles, the movement points to its Bantu identity as a reaction to the discrimination against this nation in Brazil. This kind of discrimination has a history and tradition in Brazil; it started with the pioneer of the African studies in Brazil, Nina Rodrigues who, by choosing Jeje-Nagô nation as a model, excluded the so-called Candomblé Angola of the Bantu nation from African-Brazilian studies. Candomblé Angola fell victim to the evolutionist ideology inherited from the 19th century, which defended the racial, intellectual and cultural supremacy of the Sudanese who came from the Benin Gulf and other regions in Africa. The flyer which promoted the meeting restated the Bantu identity: "Brazilian society has always ignored the cultural and national identities of our ancestors. The MonaBANTU is trying to rescue this heritage. The vast continent of Africa is so diverse in its culture and people, just like Europe. A person born in Italy, besides being European, is recognized and identified as Italian. A person born in Germany is German. We want the same recognition of our territorial, social and cultural identities, which Brazil's dominant culture is trying to take from us. We are proud of our African origin, but we insist: our nationality is Bantu". X – Conclusion The Black movements, by reappropriating African religions, found their mark of identity, making it clear that it is the diversity that keeps the Afro-descendants together. The language, the clearest evidence of this diversity, was the ultimate symbol of cultural resistance. The reappropriation of a nation, whether it is Bantu, Jeje, Nagô or any other, does not imply defending a specific African identity as against an African alterity, transforming what was once the nucleus of the African culture resistance movement into a focus of intolerance, which makes distinctions, divides and weakens this same culture and the very struggle.

Descrição:

The project entitled "Linguistic intolerance towards blacks and forms of resistance" is developed along two lines: the first investigates when and how linguistic prejudice against Brazilian black Portuguese speakers originated, through the identification of intolerance, manifested in behaviour and discourse. The second attempts to characterize forms of resistance from the blacks as Portuguese speakers who have inherited the African languages brought to Brazil.