

“ORIXÁS: GOD'S CULTURAL MANIFESTATION”
A STUDY OF THE 'ENCULTURATED' MASSES WITH ELEMENTS OF THE AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS

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Introduction

Good afternoon everyone. I congratulate the people who were responsible for such a fantastic event and I thank the coordinators of this space for the opportunity of exposing my research.

The text I am going to present is part of the research I have been developing at the Postgraduate Program in Social Anthropology of the University of São Paulo (Brazil), with which I will receive the master degree in Anthropology.

My objective is to analyze in which way some symbols of the afro-Brazilian religions (such as Candomblé) participate in the catholic liturgy, what meanings they assume and which is their contribution within the dialog that these two religious systems have been establishing.

Since Nina Rodrigues (2006 [1896]) and Roger Bastide (1989) the relation between catholic cosmology and afro-Brazilian religions was put in evidence. Though the use of symbols has been a constant in the mass ritual, it was with the development of the Liberation Theology in the second half of the Twentieth Century, that many elements of people's everyday, which were incorporated in the celebrations kept intimate relation with other religious codes. And so, some of these objects and persons, by assuming a specific function in the catholic ritual could produce in the believers a diverging effect from the one initially thought. This text is inscribed in this debate.

Our hypothesis is that the agents of the Afro Pastoral¹ accepted the symbols of the AfroBrazilian religions at the interior of the Catholic Church, mainly during the mass because such elements were “culturalized”: by taking them from its original context their meaning was purged; being, in turn, reinterpreted as belonging to the “afro Brazilian culture”. When incorporated to the catholic rite, they were dressed with a “Christian” religious meaning. In this way, a *continuum*² is established through the “enculturated” liturgies³ between the two religious systems, in a such manner that in the same space symbolically different rituals are performed, that is, the same symbols are operationalized with divergent demands, but not necessarily excluding one another. Thus, within the

¹ Group responsible for the organization of the “inculturated” catholic liturgies.

²Claude Lévi- Strauss, since his 1960 works interprets opposition couples in a dialectic way, that is, between nature/culture, myth/ritual, metonymy/metaphor there is a term that allows the passage from a pole to the other and the comprehension of these poles. That what was in total opposition was put in relation through a mediator that occupies an ambiguous position between the two poles. So, the mediator can be eliminated from a continuous series to create discontinuity erasing the continuity, or its eliminated from a discontinuous series to establish a continuity, by this way between the opposites in a relation there is a *continuum*.

³In this text we will understand the terms “afro mass” and “masses or inculturated liturgies” as synonyms.

catholic church there is a diffuse reflection of a phenomena observed in the Brazilian society: the choosing of certain elements as representative of the “people's culture”.

To attain the proposed objective, the ethnography focused the “liturgies enculturated” (masses, baptisms and marriages) with afro-Brazilian symbols⁴ performed among other places at the Nossa Sra. Achiropita⁵ (at the Bela Vista neighborhood) and at Nossa Sra. Do Rosário dos Homens Pretos (at the Largo de Paissandu) Churches, both in São Paulo city. The former counts with an important actuation of the Afro Pastoral, and performs numerous activities with the objective of reconstructing inside the Catholic Church the “black way to pray”. Meanwhile, the latter built and maintained by the brotherhood Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos is presented by its members as a faithful keeper of the catholic traditions. Both have in common the figure of the “black mother” as a great icon of afro religiosity. At the Achiropita she is evoked as a strong woman, symbol of the resistance, whereas at Paissandu she is mostly venerated for her kindness and openness, in a way that reminds the interpretation of the wet-nurse made by Gilberto Freyre (1999).

Black militant catholics or black catholic militants?

Historically, it was due to brotherhoods and fraternities to constitute themselves as the main place for black catholics. Here, they were able to organize themselves (BASTIDE, 1989), to establish friendships and develop a religiosity of their own, marked by traces of the African culture. The general model was the secular order, which offered an organization structure. So, belonging to a brotherhood was also a path to insert oneself into the Brazilian society. These institutions had as the patron saint the figure of black saints (as saint Benedict, and saint Iphigenia) and the devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary, it was through them that the Catholic Church defined the place blacks should occupy at its interior: separated from the whites by the edification of the churches or at the lateral chapels.

We understand at this point that through fraternities and brotherhoods there was an appropriation of the black by the Catholic Church. Their cultural and religious expressions were depreciated during the period of slavery, so it was only by baptism and afterwards, when fully associated to these institutions that they gained a social *status* which theoretically classified them as people, even if in reality they lived in subhuman conditions.

An emblematic figure, in São Paulo, is that of the “black mother” which stands at the same square where is placed the church of the brotherhood do Rosário. The shape of a woman who

4 I am using the term culture in accord with Clifford Geertz definition: “a pattern of meanings transmitted historically, incorporated in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms with which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and their activities in relation to life” (1989: 66)

5 This church at the Bela Vista neighborhood, has prerogative in the study of the “enculturated masses” with elements afro, because it was one pioneers in the city of São Paulo to adopt this type of liturgic celebration, it has also subsided the creation of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral, besides having as a leader for twenty years, one of its founders and cultivator, father Antonio Aparecido da Silva (pe. Toninho).

nurses a baby can be understood as a representation of a wet-nurse, one historically seen as paradoxical: for many it reveals the cruelty with which black women were treated during slavery, because they were forbidden to feed their own children to feed those of their masters, yet, others understand the gesture as revealing the affection that reunited masters and slaves in Brazil, because by being fed by these women, white children got an eternal debt of gratitude and grew a certain kindness towards their nurses (DEIAB, 2006).

Some members of the brotherhood see the statue as a representation of Our Lady, they periodically offer her flowers and candles. Before one of the “afro masses”, performed at this church, I could see the “washing of the black mother” with perfumed water and yellow rose petals, I asked one of the women participating at the ritual, what were they doing? And she answered me: “we are taking care of our lady... we must take care of her inside and outside for she to protect us. At the end, what good is it to take care only inside? She is our little mother, we have to take care of her here [outside] also [...] that's why we wash and put flowers”.

Focusing in the example just cited, if we place the relation between catholicism and afro-Brazilian religions in a *religious continuum*, is possible to rightly state that in the “inculturated liturgies” “two mothers” are being worshiped by some members of the brotherhood do Rosário: Our Lady and the iabás⁶, taking the cult to one as an extension of the cult to the other one. Our Lady do Rosário is worshiped “inside” the church and that ritual is expanded to “outside”, note that here are not exalted the virginal purity virtues, serenity and motherly sweetness, but, the force of the warrior woman, her femininity and enduring capacity. The figure of the “black mother” allows the approximation of the “traditional black catholicism” sustained by the discourse of the members of the brotherhood with the “enculturation” proposed by the Afro Pastoral.

The emergence of the Black Pastoral Agents (APNs by its name in Portuguese), in the decade of 1980, questioned the traditionally allocated place for blacks inside the Catholic Church. At the beginning this group was placed in the “missionary action”⁷ line, revealing the intentions ecclesiastical hierarchies: “evangelize” the black, that is to say, part of the clergy considered the “indoctrination” the black received not sufficient to turn them true Christians, leaving place to the processes of sincretism. This vision invigorated up to the realization of the Fraternity Campaign⁸ in 1988, in which one of the goals was precisely to “complete” the evangelization. With the insistence of the APNs of presenting the social problems, the catholic hierarchy created the Afro Pastoral as a

6 Feminine orixás from the afro-Brazilian pantheon linked to motherhood. For example, Oxum and Iemanjá. (Bastide, 1989)

7 The “missionary action Lines” were created by the CNBB, inspired in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, to organize the strategies of intervention in the society (evangelize).

8 The Fraternity Campaign was created with an action of the Brazilian Caritas to raise funds for beneficence works. Incorporated by the CNBB it turned itself in a mechanism of social intervention, discussing about the problems in the society and raising funds to realize the projects linked with each topic, which is picked annually. In 1988 the motto of the CF was “listen the clamour of the people” and was about the racial relations in Brazil.

way to harmonize these exigencies, that is, the coming of a specific pastoral to deal with an ethnic group. This, as the form that the ecclesiastical chiefs found to control the militancy at the interior of the church.

Thus, on one side the brotherhoods and fraternities represented an appropriation of the black by the catholic church and, on the other side the afro pastoral reverts this scenario and presents the appropriation of the catholicism by the black. In other words, the actions of this pastoral pretend to reformulate the way in which racial relations are conceived by the catholicism. The Council's documents propose the "enculturation", this means, the transformation of the cultural expressions from its interior, having for basis the Christian faith paradigm (MIRANDA, 2001: 58) whereas, the pastoral members want to harness to this faith elements from the afro- Brazilian religious universe.

An example is the realization of the "enculturated mass" to honor the Black Mother at the Nossa Senhora Achiropita church, in São Paulo, celebrated the Sunday after the mother's day.

"Afro Mass": passion and feast.

The permission for the realization of the "afro masses" was granted after the Episcopal Conference in Latin America, at Santo Domingo in 1992. Summoned by Pope John Paul the Second, this reunion of Latin - American bishops dealt specifically with the cultural dimension. Its final document elected the "enculturation" of the faith and the gospel as a priority for the catholic evangelism, in that sense the liturgy should express itself through the elements of the local culture.

With the creation of the Afro Pastoral, black agents' actions started to obey the general orientations determined by the chief group who was at the CNBB site at Brasília, this also meant that the "enculturated" liturgies started to be celebrated based in a common schema, and so, there were done reunions and workshops to standardize the "mass enculturated with black culture elements". priest Jurandyr Azevedo⁹ said that "before there was no script, we created along with what we had in our minds, we took many things from candomblé, and little by little we separated until we got to what we have today; there were many difficulties, because nobody knew for sure what was going on ... things have matured".

In São Paulo, the Nossa Senhora Achiropita church was one of the first to perform this kind of celebration. Today they celebrate two big feasts: the Black Mother and Saint Benedict, both signaled at the State of São Paulo touristic calendar. At the N. Sra. Do Rosário dos Homens Pretos church, even if its members say that the "afro masses" occur frequently, during 2009 (two thousand and nine) there were just two: one on May thirteenth the other on November nineteenth.

All the "enculturated masses" in São Paulo follow the same pattern: the asymmetric, the colorful, the exuberant and the counter-order in the decoration of the space, all of which turned out to

9 Secretary of the Mariama Institute. Conversation hold in July and October 2010.

be a synonym of the “black culture”. Not all the members of the Afro Pastoral have an agreement towards the meaning given to the colors, gestures and all other symbols in the celebration, they are satisfied to answer “that is afro” or “in Africa it is like that”. At the N. Sra do Rosário Church, the organizers said that none of the symbols in use are chosen haphazardly, but as I inquired the meaning of some of the symbols which kept, from my point of view, certain relation with the afro-Brazilian religions they showed surprise, one of them said, “you ca say whatever you want, all that you are seeing is so”.

Father Francisco de Oxum beliefs the mass organizers are “guided” in the choosing of the religious symbols present at the mass, but he affirmed that he never gave any orientation. Priest Gabriel dos Santos¹⁰, when talking about the afro masses at the Rosário Church in Salvador, states he never suggested anything: “everything comes out of their minds, its their way of praying [...] it is true that you can see some resemblances with the canbomblé, because there are people from the canbomblé, but the mass is a catholic one, it is just that the black culture is only one”.

In general, what the research has revealed is that the “African” symbols used in the enculturated liturgies (specially at the afro masses) are chosen deliberately by the agents who produce the celebration, beneath the orientations of the national coordination, and in agreement with the particular comprehensions of what it is the black culture. In other words, we can see that many persons choose the elements of the africanhood from what they learned (in courses and readings), saw or heard about Africa and the “African culture”.

The symbols considered to be from the black culture are recurrent: atabaques, colored cloths, the image of the saints (used as a kind of “catholic version” of the African “ancestors”), the black people heroes (Zumbi and Anastasia slave), the foods¹¹ and earth products. The decoration of the space changes accordingly with the creativity of the group. In general it is placed a colored cloth over the altar's white cloth, there are placed laces at the banks, and sometimes the floor is covered by plants. For example, at the saint Benedict feast at the N. Sra. Achiropita Church the decoration was made with coffee boughs. The chants, always executed in the rhythm of the atabaques or in samba key, do not vary much. I have found in other churches in São Paulo the same chant booklet.

Taking as an example the mass of the Black Mother, performed in May sixteenth, 2010 (two thousand and ten) at the N. Sra. Achiropita Church, I will analyze the presentation of the offerings, as an illustration of the argument.

At the second part of the mass the “enculturation” signals mark the presentation of the offerings (offertory) and the moment of the thanksgiving action. During the offertory procession, the

10 Brotherhood N. Sra. Do Rosário dos Homen Pretos chaplain at Salvador. Interview given in December the second, 2009 (two thousand and nine).

11 In São Paulo this foods are: cotton, sugar cane, banana, orange, apple, grape, fuba pastry, chicken cuscus, sweets (candies, lollipops, paçoca, pumpkin or potato candy, suspiro)

believers dancing take up to the parsonage the offerings and the symbols. Each one has to bring in the food that will be offered, but the person who will take it from the back of the church to the parsonage is chosen arbitrarily. The Roman Missal (§140) prescribes that the president of the celebration has to welcome the offerings brought by the people, placing over the altar the bread and the wine, and at the credence table the other elements. At the “Afro masses”, in general, the Priest only receives the bread and the wine, the other elements are placed in front of the altar (over a cloth, matting or leaves) by the believers, in some celebrations, the deacon takes the bread and the wine while some priest of the afro-Brazilian religions takes in the other symbols.

Caetana Damasceno (1990) had already called attention to the disposition of the foods at the “afro masses” remembering that the orixás at the candomblé “eat” at the floor. Beyond this, my interpretation is that each priest (catholic and afro) by welcoming part of the offerings and depositing them in different places, lets appear the double ritual that is being executed. On the one side there is a catholic mass, on the other one, a ceremony that approximates itself to the afro-Brazilian religions.

When the catholic ritual prescribes the priest's obligations at the mass understands that he is acting *in persona Christi*, that is, “the person of Christ”. In other words, the rite understands that the president of the celebration is Jesus himself, who welcomes the offerings of the people and offers them to God, and so he is the materialization of the mediation between men and divinity. By not receiving the symbols of the “afro culture” the priest excludes them from the ritual, considering them foreign to the relation men- Christian god. Though, by permitting that a priest of the afro-Brazilian religions welcomes those elements, it is evident that there is a relationship at other level, that does not belong to the catholic purpose. But by the classification proposed by Borges (2001: 70 and followings) or Pereira (2001), I understand that there is a *continuum* between the catholic ritual and the afro-Brazilian religions, being that the manipulation of the symbols configures a relationship between one system and the other one. So, the determination of the place that is occupied at the parsonage defines the kind involvement in the catholic celebration. By receiving the foods that will be “sanctified” and then portioning them out, saint priests and mothers are executing -at the catholic ritual- their priesthood, that is “guarding the orixás' things”. This is a function that the priest cannot perform, and must keep himself from welcoming the offerings and distributing them at the end of the mass. In some cases, those foods are sprayed with água de cheiro by the afro priests. Therefore it is possible to observe the symbolic realization of the two rituals conjointly: one, catholic, presided by the priest, and another one related to the afro-Brazilian religions, conducted by religious from these cults.

In that sense one of the chants singed during the presentation of the offerings, is significant:

...Oba, Oba, Oba
Recebe Olorum nossos dons! / welcome Olorum our gifts!

Oba, Oba, Oba
A oferta das nossas nações/ the offering from the our nations
Oba, Oba, Oba
recebe ó Senhor, pão e vinho/ welcome oh Lord, bread and wine
Oba, oba, oba
as conquistas de um povo a caminho/ the conquers of a people in the way...

In this chant, it calls the attention that even though the parallel between Olorum and Father God - considered the same person- the attribution of the offerings is differentiated: to Olorum the gifts, that is “the offering from the nations”, to the Lord the “bread and wine”, this means “the conquers of a people in the way”. We understand that the “gifts” are all of the symbols that entered in the procession (all but bread and wine), that represent the “nations” (ethnic groups or the diverse afro-Brazilian religions). While, “the conquers of a people in the way”, shows the militancy of the blacks within the catholic church.

Conclusion

The emergence of the APNs and consequently the Afro Pastoral, reorganizes the interior of the catholic church in Brazil, making that the black be thought as a subject who has a culture. The actions of these groups allowed the process of “culturalization” observed in the Brazilian society are reflected in the Catholicism. Coined at the center of the Second Vatican Council, the term “enculturation”, reveals the manner in which the Catholicism should treat in the third millennium the “pagan cultures”: reveal the Christian god present in them.

The “enculturated liturgies” are directly linked to this process and is one of the instruments used by the Afro Pastoral to perform the “blackening” of the catholic church, not anymore through the brotherhoods and fraternities, but by way of the liturgy.

By placing in parallel the symbols of the negritude (as considered by the Afro Pastoral) and the cosmology of the afro-Brazilian religions, we see that simultaneously to the catholic ceremony, happens a cult strictly related with the afro-Brazilian religions. Under the veil of the “afro mass” it is possible to see a cult to the African divinities (or afro-Brazilian as is the case with caboclos and preto-velhos), and this is why those celebrations attract adepts from the two religious systems, because depending on the perspective of view, the subject is identified with one or the other.

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