

Reading roger bastide

Deutero-learning the african religions in brazil

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DEUTERO-LEARNING THE AFRICAN RELIGIONS IN BRAZIL ¹

Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape – it is, in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position [...] As for who an African novelist is, it is partly a matter of passports, of individual volition and particularly of seeing from that perspective [...] Being an African, like being a Jew, carries certain penalties – as well as benefits, of course. But perhaps more penalties than benefits. Ben-Gurion once said: “If somebody wants to be a Jew, that’s enough for me.” We could say the same for being an African.

Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, 1990, pp. 92-93.

I N 1942, Gregory Bateson proposed the concept of “deutero-learning” [Bateson 2000: 167-183], or learning how to learn. By this he meant that learning is reflexive: to really learn something, one has to learn to reflexively contextualize information. In the *Metalogue* “What is an instinct”, the Father explains to the Daughter that when a dog learns this is “instinctive” – “unless the dog had to learn to learn” [Bateson 2000: 41]. In the same way, a dog may learn “that buzzer means meat powder. But this is not the end of the hierarchy of types involved. The experimental subject may become more skilled in learning. He may *learn to learn*, and it is not inconceivable that still higher orders of learning may occur in human beings” [Bateson 2000: 204].

In other words, we (organisms) *learn to learn*, or in the more technical phrase, we deutero-learn [Bateson 2000: 274].

In addition to deutero-learning’s already broad applications, it seems that anthropology might yet extract more from this notion and

apply it to disciplinary methodology, developing a species of “ethnographic deutero-learning” capable of distancing us not only from what we know, but also from how we think we know what we know. In so doing, the banal fact that doing ethnography consists of learning would acquire an additional dimension that it also, and above all, consists of learning how to learn. But what might this mean in practice? Rather than applying our stable forms or processes of knowledge to the materials and content we find in the field, we might accept that our own knowledge procedures – our own methods of learning – must be transformed.

1. This is modified version of “Cavalo dos deuses: Roger Bastide e as transformações das religiões de matriz africana no Brasil”, published in *Revista de Antropologia* 54 (1), pages 407-432, 2012. I would like to thank Júlia Frajtag Sauma for the translation of the article, as well as Luisa Elvira Belaunde, Antonia Walford, and Michael Amoroso for their careful revision of the translation. This text is part of a work in progress that, following long interruption, resumes my research into African religions in Brazil from a new perspective. Preliminary versions of this article were presented at the panel “Rethinking the Foundations of Afro-Atlantic Anthropology”, at the XXVIII International Congress of the Association of Latin-American Studies, Rio de Janeiro, 2009, at the International Conference “French perspectives on Umbanda and Cadomblé, Art, Science and Religion”, 2009, and at the panel “Immanence, Transcendence, and Participation in a Brazilian Possession Religion”, at the Spring 2011 “Meeting of the Society for the Anthropology of Religion, Religion and Materiality”, in Santa Fe. I am thankful to Stephan Palmié and Olívia Gomes da Cunha for the invitation to participate in the first of these events (as well as to John Collins for his comments on the occasion); to Fernanda Peixoto and Marion Aubrée for the invitation to the second event; and Stephan Palmié and Ramón Sarró for the third. And also to Paula Siqueira and Gabriel Banaggia for their comments.

Deutero-Learning the African Religions in Brazil

The reflexive critique of the 1980s and 1990s could have foregrounded learning during its interrogations of the processes of anthropological knowing. However, by assuming that the anthropology practiced until then was founded on an impossible representation of “the other”, the “postmodernists” tended to emphasize how our ways of knowledge affected those of others (whether in the form of projections on the part of anthropologists or others’ appropriations of anthropological knowledge for the legitimation and invention of tradition) instead of exploring the possibility of destabilizing our own knowledge by engaging the knowledge of these “others”. On the other hand, if anthropology is not about representation (or even explanation), but about conceptual alignments between different forms and contents of knowledge, learning and deutero-learning become almost synonyms of the anthropological practice [Viveiros de Castro 2004; Goldman 2009].

In 1946, four years after Bateson’s article on deutero-learning, Roger Bastide published a paper on “Catholic-fetishist syncretism” where he touched on a topic which, many years later, came to stand at the core of the debates on African religions in Brazil. Following a peculiar comment about how some cult centers “imitate unskillfully and erroneously” other more traditional ones [Bastide 1973: 165], Bastide raises a hypothesis about the existence of another modality of “imitation”, which he calls “indirect”:

[It is done] through the mediation of Afrologists. For it would be a mistake to think that “saint keepers” (the name

currently given to *pais-de-santo*) are ignorant people. They read the books that are written about themselves and that could have an influence on their beliefs or religions, principally because these books combine Brazilian facts with African facts. Given the difficulties of travelling to Africa, as they might have done before, today’s keepers study Africa through books in order to reform their own religion [1973: 168].

At this point, Bastide inserts a note, to be quoted in full:

We find it interesting to note the reactions of Afro-Brazilian believers, when confronted with the books that refer to themselves. In general, they all recognize the accuracy of books by Nina Rodrigues and Manoel Querino. On A. Ramos, opinions are divided: there are those who believe it to be equally good and those who affirm that he “romanticizes” a little. Édison Carneiro is criticized for basing himself on Joãozinho da Gávea [probably Joãozinho da Gomeia], who caused him to make mistakes at various points. In Donald Pierson’s work they distinguish between the precise information provided by Dona Aninha and that collected from other informants, wherein mistakes are identified with distaste. In fact, an ogan publicly reacted against Pierson’s book on Bahian Candomblé in the press [...] In Recife, Gonçalves Fernandes was also attacked for some of his information. For my part, I don’t doubt that I will also be criticized... Truly, both the books and criticisms of them are legitimate, for as I will show further ahead, *there is no one African religion, but many* and what might be correct for one nation, will not be so for another. And there also exists “spontaneous” *terreiros*.

This explains the diversity of points of view [1973: 168, nota 11; my emphasis].

My main purpose here is to examine this aspect of Bastide's work as a form of ethnographic deutero-learning in the limited and topologically transformed sense proposed above. This article, then, is a tentative of bibliographic-theoretical exploration and reinterpretation, in which ethnographic data are only utilized to clarify certain points of discussion. The ethnographic questions quickly raised here are treated more fully in another publication [Goldman 2012].²

Born in 1898 in a French Protestant family, Roger Bastide graduated in philosophy and shortly after devoted himself to studying religion. He moved to Brazil in 1938 in order to succeed Claude Lévi-Strauss at the Chair of Sociology of the University of São Paulo, and remained there until 1957.

During those twenty years, Bastide became an ethnologist and a sociologist of religion (name of the chair he had at the Sorbonne from 1958), and he learnt about what he called "African religions of Brazil". The result of his long staying – mixed with short trips and quick field work in different parts of Brazil – materialized in hundreds of articles and more than ten books on religion as well as on art, dreams, mental illness, anthropological theory, etc. [Hess 1989 and 1992; Ravelet 1992; Peixoto 2000; Despland 2009] His most important writings are, for sure, those resulting from his two State Doctorate theses, presented in 1957 [Bastide 1958 and 1978].

In Brazilian anthropology, Bastide's work has remained salient and problematic until today. Originally considered a key contribution to the study of African-Brazilian religions, his work became later and particularly

over the last thirty years the target of a series of attacks. One of the reasons why he suffered such attacks was the fact that Bastide never carried out proper fieldwork, as defined by current anthropological patterns. But, critics also focused upon what they saw as Bastide's "romanticism": the attempt to find "Africanisms" in Afro-American religions and to value them so much as to define them as criteria for his hierarchical classification.

As Roger Sansi wrote:

Bastide became an ogan ("Sir") in the "court" of Mãe Senhora [...] This position allowed him to state, resolutely, "Africanus sum", "I am African" [...]. But he did not spend much time doing research on Candomblé. In fact, he borrowed a lot of information from his friend, Pierre Verger [2007: 55].³

2. To be published in English [Goldman 2016]. This forthcoming article will extensively discuss the ethnographic and theoretical questions relative to gift and initiation (with special reference, among others, to Jim Wafer [1991], Véronique Boyer [1996], Paul Christopher Johnson [2002], Arnaud Halloy [2005 and 2012] and Roger Sansi [2007 and 2009]). I left this ethnographic discussion outside of the present text.

3. Roger Sansi is not alone. See also Peter Fry: "Roger Bastide could not be black, but believed that he could be African" [1986: 31] and "There are also more romantic attachments that establish propinquity to an idealized Africa. This, for example, was the experience of Roger Bastide who was able to pronounce, significantly in Latin, 'Africanus sum'" [2008: 211]. See also Stefania Capone [2010]. Referring to "how the quest for African survivals and contemporaneous theories of religion and magic converged to structure the scholarly discourse on Afro-Brazilian religions" [Capone 2000: 70], Kelly Hayes affirms that "It was in the hands of Bastide, however, that this model was articulated in its most powerful – and enduring – formulation" [2007: 301-302].

However, it is precisely this point generally considered evidence of Bastide's Africanist romanticism, that makes me believe that his work is still central to the field of African-Brazilian studies. As Ordep Serra [1995: 129] has noted, Bastide's scream "Africanus sum" could be well understood as a testimony of his "identification" with Candomblé people. And perhaps, more than an identification what we have here is as a sort of "becoming-black" revealing the potential for deterritorialization [Deleuze and Guattari 2004] that permeates Bastide's thought which constantly insists that, independently from its "origins", we and our thought are always capable of becoming something else. A very powerful way to engage with the people we work with, not judging them but learning from and with them, accepting their thought as symmetrical to our [Stengers 2000: 138-141].

From this point of view, let's go back to Bastide's piece quoted above. For now, I only need to emphasize two points, leaving the most profound observations to be discussed further ahead in greater detail. Firstly, it seems curious that what Bastide considered in 1946 as proof of the wisdom and knowledge of adepts of African religions in Brazil, is exactly what many years later came to be seen as evidence of the influence of outside scholars. Secondly, and more importantly, is the question of whether we are able to differentiate the work of scholars (that is, ourselves) from those of the people we are "studying", or be condemned to attribute the latter academic characteristics, treating *terreiros* as if they were university departments, where authorial "authority" derives from titles, seniority, career

and nationality – that is, from the author's position in the "intellectual field" – and where a reader's "authority" depends on his or her capacity to brandish so-called important titles before those who are supposedly unfamiliar with them.

Such an academic manner of treating both intellectuals and religious adepts, and the relationships between them, has had various consequences. For instance, since the 1970s, it has become an evermore popular sport, among intellectuals who study African religions in Brazil, to denounce those who came before them: (elder) intellectuals who committed a double sin, one more or less intentional and the other more or less involuntary.

Between 1890 and 1970, the intentional sin consisted in the somewhat desperate efforts to connect the African-Brazilian phenomena with supposedly pure African realities. Scholars thus transformed themselves into judges, capable of deciding on the greater or lesser accuracy of different religious centers – and even national regions or localities – in relation to an "African model", which was taken to be original, homogeneous, consistent and pure. As for the involuntary sin, whether they were successful or not in their search for Africa in Brazil (and it is usually thought that they were not), it is supposed that these scholars had an influence upon the religious adepts they studied, in such a way that the latter began to see some advantages in proclaiming loyalty to an ancestral Africa created in the books written about themselves.

In this story, initiated largely by Nina Rodrigues, Roger Bastide came to occupy a central and terminal position. After him we

became more intelligent, leaving aside the search for an imaginary Africa's shadow and contending ourselves, very wisely, with a very real "Brazilian society".

I do not intend to go into any detail about this self-professed revolutionary version of African-Brazilian studies.⁴ Let's just underline how strange it is to make of Roger Bastide the main actor or playwright in this shadow theatre. For it is well known that Bastide's explicit objective – perhaps what he considered to be of greatest relevance from a scientific point of view – was, precisely, to elaborate a properly sociological approach to African religions in Brazil. An approach that should explore relations between the different levels of a social reality, which he called infra and super-structures (when using a Marxist vocabulary), or society and culture (when closer to anthropology), or social morphology and collective representations (when adopting his preferred model of Durkheimian sociology, especially when flavored with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Marcel Griaule or Georges Gurvitch).

In any case, Bastide's main issue is clearly how to relate religion and society and this does not differ much from what was done later, although many scholars claimed to do it precisely against Bastide's work. However, there are two points where Bastide's model does differ from those elaborated from the 1970s onwards.

Firstly, Bastide's approach is historical and dynamic. That is why he regards African religions in Brazil as a paramount example: a laboratory to empirically investigate one of sociology's big questions. For if Marxism, social anthropology or Durkheimianism agree

that the "base" has precedence over the "representations", how are we to understand a religious set that, when wrenched by force from its bases, does not disappear and, furthermore, insists on maintaining itself? Would it be necessary, in this case, to invert the whole scheme and, calling upon Griaule, attribute to representations the power to determine the morphological base?

To some extent, Bastide seems to have taken this path. In *Le candomblé de Bahia*, he asserts that:

It is not social morphology that dominates and explains religion, as Durkheim would have wanted, but rather it is the mystical aspect that dominates the social [1958: 28].

He also says:

The social is the fruit of the mystical, as indicated by Griaule, material organization reflects spiritual organization [*ibid.*: 95].

But this is not always his position. Indeed, throughout this same book, he also presents a much more nuanced and changing position. Thus, if at some points the author seems to opt for "mystic" precedence, his fundamental hypothesis is much more interesting than a simple inversion of determinisms. When analyzing the connections between social organization and thought through *The African*

4. I did it elsewhere: see M. Goldman [2007: 118-119, note 3]. See also O. Serra [1995: 8-9, 44-75, 112-124, 130-147, 166, 175-180, 188-189]. And, for a detailed consideration of some of the main works in this line, G. Banaggia [2008] and M. Bondi [2007].

*Religions of Brazil*⁵, Bastide emphasizes a diachronic perspective over a synchronic one, and this distinguishes him from those who followed and criticized him. Indeed, his diachronic perspective leads him to a crucial finding: that African religious representations not only “survive” a brutal rupture from the infrastructure on which they were dependent, or with which they were articulated, but also show themselves capable of producing new organizational forms, which are different from dominant ones:

Like a live creature, it [African religion] secreted its own shell, so to speak. It created original social groups similar to, yet at the same time different from, the African ones. Spirit cannot live divorced from matter, and if the matter is lacking, it creates a new kind [Bastide 1978: 19].

This hypothesis, I think, explains Bastide’s enchantment with “the *candomblé* of Bahia” (and everything similar to it: the *vodum* of Maranhão, *xangô* of Pernambuco and, to a lesser degree, the *batuque* of Rio Grande do Sul). At least, it is less unpleasant and resentful than more traditional accusations against him, which insist on his alleged nostalgia for a lost or imaginary Africa.

Bastide is amazed by the various ways in which these religions demonstrate their resistance: their ability to maintain, recreate and expand life in absolutely adverse conditions. Resistance is concretely manifest in their capacity to organize social forms – the *terreiros* – wherein life overflows strictly religious dimensions. He tirelessly emphasizes their independence:

Each house or *terreiro* is autonomous, dependent on a saint-father or mother

who does not recognize any authority, superior to his or her own. They constitute worlds apart, much like African islands in the middle of a Western ocean [Bastide 1958: 53].

At the same time, with regards to more inclusive formations – the so-called “Brazilian society” – modernity and dominant Catholicism also play a part in the relationships between infrastructures and superstructures; lest we forget, capitalism and Catholicism also have exogenous origins, and their convergence with “Brazilian society” is not automatic. According to Bastide, a religious superstructure that was capable of generating a new morphological base but had difficulties in maintaining it, would be related to socio-economic foundations with rather inadequate religious representations. If this were true, wouldn’t both be destined for a meeting that would provoke a notable historic event, nothing less than “the birth of a religion” (the title of the sixth chapter in Bastide’s *African Religions of Brazil*)? Bastide wrote:

For a sociologist nothing is more exciting than to witness the birth of a new religion before his very eyes, as it were [1978: 339].

5. The original title of the book is *Les religions africaines au Brésil. Vers une sociologie des inter-pénétrations de civilisations* – literally *The African Religions in Brazil. Toward a Sociology of the Inter-penetration of Civilizations*. However, the English translation, published in 1978, was named *The African Religions of Brazil*. I kept the English published title wondering if the replacement is not related to the anti-Africanist turn of the 1970s.

Thus Bastide ends up with a triangular conception of African Religions of Brazil: at the triangle's topmost vertex is (Bahian) *candomblé*; at the base, on the right, *umbanda* (from Rio de Janeiro) and, on the left, *macumba* (from São Paulo). Obviously, *umbanda* is the new religion, whose birth Bastide had the privilege to observe: the result of the union between infrastructure and superstructure, but now with both head and tail in the "right" places and not with the interesting, but necessarily provisional, phenomenon where superstructure determined morphological base.

For Bastide, *macumba* signals an ever-present risk in the historical process of structural realignment: when things do not fit together as they should, religious representations do not articulate with actual social groups, which are then unable to exert control functions and, thus, everything degenerates into magic, on the one hand, and anomic individualism, on the other. In fact, these terms are practically synonymous, being that here, as on so many other occasions, Bastide faithfully follows Durkheim's and Mauss' teachings.⁶

Nevertheless, something remains unexplained and mysterious in this ingenious model. The same mystery that seems to obsess scholars, from Nina Rodrigues onwards: for at the end of it all, why – and sometimes how – does *candomblé* "survive"? Or rather, why doesn't it transform itself once and for all into Christianity, *umbanda*, spiritism or secularism, according to personal taste? Or, at least, why doesn't it dissipate into the corrupted, simplified or libertarian form of *macumba*? As Bastide synthetically asks himself:

How is it that *candomblé* still exist?
[1978: 164]⁷

...
15

Bastide's reply is not entirely clear: at times, the *terreiros* are seen as "niches" that survived from pure inertia where "external" conditions were favorable [*ibid.*: 58, 61, 125, 160, 214, among others]. On other occasions, Bastide underlines these niches' active and productive character; they are able to escape all "infrastructural determination":

The initial adaptive phase was followed
by a second creative one [*ibid.*: 160].

Everything occurs as if the author were unable to face his own discovery, that "niches" of resistance can be created within and against a dominant infrastructure. And, in a certain way, this is what we are left to do

6. As Kelly Hayes [2007] correctly states, it is certainly not easy to remain impassive to formulations such as "macumba results from social parasitism, the shameless exploitation of the lower classes' gullibility or a relaxation of immoral tendencies, from rape to murder" [Bastide 1978: 300]. However, I would risk saying that, despite their clearly ethnocentric and racist character, from the author's point of view they have a function: to defend at least some of the African religions in Brazil from the persecutions and prejudices that they have always suffered.

7. The question evidently follows the historicist presupposition that guides not only Bastide, but also practically all scholars of African religions in Brazil. For it would be difficult to imagine a reason why *candomblé*, *umbanda*, *macumba* and all their innumerable other forms cannot simply coexist, rather than necessarily succeeding each other. As observed elsewhere [Goldman 2009: 109 and 133], "history" should be understood as a sequence of becomings, which are understood as blocks of virtual-real coexistence [Deleuze and Guattari 2004, Plateau 4].

with Bastide himself, that is, liberate his ideas from their “infrastructure”, so that we can use them as “niches of resistance”.

Of course, “modern” authors do not formulate the problem in these terms; and, in fact, they would rather use these terms to accuse “old” authors. Still, writing at a time when African religions in Brazil were expanding, the authors who started writing in the 1970s were tempted, as it were, to make a virtue of necessity. Given that the “mystery” consisted in understanding the coexistence of these religions with processes of modernization, as it was no longer possible to use concepts such as “survival”, there was nothing better than to make modernization itself the cause of their permanence and even their development. In this way, almost exclusive emphasis was placed upon relations external to the religious groups, which explained their characteristics as the effect of more comprehensive structures [Goldman 2009: 123].

We should remember that at the beginning of *The African Religions of Brazil* [Bastide 1978: 27] Bastide sustains that a great complementarity exists between the “methods” of “ethnographic research” and “sociological interpretation”, that is, between the need to take what the natives say seriously and the attempt to construct a broader depiction of these religions. This is why, at the beginning of a “sociological thesis”, the author insists that:

It is based upon long-term ethnographic observation over many years [and that] the experience that we bring is lived experience [Bastide 1978: 28].

However, we know that Roger Bastide’s “lived experience” was mostly confined to

Bahian candomblé; the data used for other examples of *African Religions of Brazil* were obtained during short field visits, in bibliographic records or through personal communications. Moreover the “Bahian candomblé” experienced by Bastide was “Nagô ritual” (his ethnography’s subtitle) as practiced in specific Salvador *terreiros* claiming descentance from one or two cult centers founded at the beginning or the middle of the 19th century by Yoruba priests. This “limitation” is not a problem in itself – as no researcher is capable to experience more than a few *terreiros* – but it does have some implications for Bastide’s work.

Firstly, the proclaimed complementarity between ethnographic and sociological methods tends to be placed in a hierarchy and even turned into an opposition. On the one hand, ethnography is reduced to data collection, which is then interpreted by the sociologist; on the other, while from the ethnographic point of view Bastide’s intuition tends to privilege the capacity of African religions in Brazil for resistance, his sociological perspective tends to distance himself from this hypothesis, leading him to an historicist model in which candomblé is almost inevitably converted into umbanda or disaggregated into macumba.⁸

This suggests that Bastide is captive to the same dilemma identified by Lévi-Strauss [1945: 517-518] in Durkheim’s work: the inability to escape the antagonism between

8. For a more recent and interesting attempt to elaborate a transformational model compatible with Bastide, see E. Dianteill [2002].

the blindness of history and the finalism of consciousness. If resistance remains in the foreground when the latter point of view is adopted, in the former it tends to be dissolved by a history that does not depend on the will of men. We know of the Lévi-Straussian “solution” to this dilemma: the unconscious [*ibid.*: 527-528]. But we also know that Bastide refused this alternative. In the “Introduction” of *The African Religions of Brazil*, he argues that:

The approach of Lévi-Strauss seems to me the only truly positive one in ethnology.

Only to ask, immediately after:

Can we stop there?

Bastide, then, concludes in the negative:

Religious beliefs go beyond the laws of exchange and solidarity, the fundamental rules of complementarity, the logic of relations [1978: 19].

However, we should observe that as it was originally published in 1960, *The African Religions of Brazil* comes a few years before Lévi-Strauss wrote the work that could have helped Bastide to rid himself of this dilemma. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss’ *Mythologiques* is less interested in revealing unconscious structures than in connecting apparently heterogeneous and disparate ethnographic facts. Or, in other terms, it is less interested in explaining these ethnographic facts through superior theories than in demonstrating that it is possible to find intelligibility in the ethnographic plane itself, through a transformational method in which each mythic actualization is treated as a transformation of others and *vice versa*.

One can perceive the potential use of this method – which is neither ethnographic, nor sociological, but anthropological – if applied to a religious ensemble whose most obvious characteristic is not to obey a single model and, still, display a family resemblance for anyone (native or researcher). The only way to articulate a “sociological” generalization and an “ethnographic” perspective is not by increasing the gap between the two, but rather by deepening the latter and transformationally extending it.

Here is not the place to develop this hypothesis but just to observe that another consequence of Bastide’s difficulty to reconcile the ethnographic and the sociological – attested to by the fact that he developed them separately, in two different books – was his vulnerability to a series of criticisms, which ensued from the mid-1970s onwards.

In these criticisms, Bastide’s (ethnographic) admiration for the *terreiros* he actually investigated are dismissed in favor of his (sociological) detachment, when faced with other manifestations of African religions in Brazil: on the one hand, transformed into a sort of “traditionalism” which would only respect what is authentically “African”; and simple ethnocentrism and prejudice, on the other. These criticisms are far from false. The problem is that they led either to the neglect of what was more productive in Bastide’s work, or to the mere reiteration and defense of what was being attacked.

It is clear that most of the criticisms directed at Bastide derive from a certain way of reading that tends to dominate our universities, where it is carefully taught to young

students. This kind of reading focuses upon the underlying intentions of ethnographic or anthropological works, its desired or undesired effects, instead of their power to allow us to experiment or access other truths and logics. Thus, as we saw almost all the criticisms directed at Bastide hardly ever address the ethnographic aspects of his work, nor the properly theoretical ones. They mostly limit themselves to pointing out – and sometimes denouncing – its ideological, romantic, traditionalist, ethnocentric character, etc.

Gift and Initiation

As the main intention here is not polemical, and much less to “defend” an author like Bastide (who evidently needs no defense), I would like to shift the focus of discussion to some ethnographic details, so that we may conclude with a sort of “return” to Bastide further ahead. Let’s begin by taking as example – and only as an example – an important article written by Véronique Boyer entitled “Gift and Initiation. About the Impact of Literature upon Possession Cults in Brazil” [1996].

Although Bastide is not explicitly mentioned in this paper, the arguments are consistent with the numerous criticisms of him. Note that other works by Boyer [1993a and especially 1993b] are much more explicit in relation to Bastide. The title, composed in two parts, is significant in itself. In fact, the most relevant ethnographic information about the relation between “gift and initiation” is provided in the article’s first few pages, and the rest of the text dedicated to the “impact of the literature on possession cults in Brazil”.

The ethnographic argument is relatively simple: all African religions in Brazil are more or less torn “between gift and initiation” [Boyer 1996: 9], or rather, between what is derived “from personal abilities manifested by the mediums during their apprenticeship” and what depends, instead, “on the competence of a religious specialist [...], his talent to explore a body of knowledge, forming a ritual and doctrinarian *corpus* to which his peers also refer” [*ibid.*: 8].

The fact that Boyer admits the existence of a “complementarity between initiation and gift” does not impede her from suggesting that, for adepts, this complementarity can be broken:

Some are certain of the connection with personal and *innate* aptitude, while others proclaim to be in favor of a well-conducted and correct initiation [*ibid.*: 8; my emphasis].

Immediately after this the author explains the origin of the opposition, from which she developed the initial complementarity:

The contrast between these notions feeds off a divergence between cult leaders’ *interests*, their preoccupation with consolidating their ascendance over the mediums they instruct, and the latter’s *aspirations*, their desire to found a center of their own. From this point of view, the recurrence of this theme in the expression of conflicts, leads us to address the relations of power that it allows in the interior of the religious universe, while taking into consideration a broader sociological environment: Brazilian society as a whole. The cult leaders’ positions are defined, in effect, in relation to the written sources evoked

above, which are invested with authority and prestige that the *terreiros*' masters attempt to appropriate. Gift and initiation thus appear less connected by any real opposition functioning at different levels and in diverse contexts, than as a polarizing effect that allows the organization of a vast semantic field in which other elements can be inserted [Boyer 1996: 8-9; my emphasis].

In this passage, the opposition between gift and initiation is redirected to the field of complementary relations, although not in the sense imagined by the adepts themselves. This allows Boyer to dedicate a large part of the article to the analysis of the "intellectual work" that had, from the 1930s onwards, been dedicated to revealing "the perfect cohesion and richness of the symbolic and ritual system" [*ibid.*: 14] of African religions in Brazil.

Boyer observes that anthropological and sociological literature is not alone in investigating these religions, and that another type of literature – which she calls "esoteric" – also writes about them. We are dealing mainly with "umbandist" literature, which from the 1940s onwards attempted to codify and "standardize" these religions. However, from the beginning, these attempts had a limit: by recognizing "the spirits' omnipotence" the "umbandist" authors lose all their ability to assert their own authority, due to the well-established fact that, in a possession religion, all more or less institutionalized mediation (whether by church or literature) runs the risk of being called into question through the adepts' direct contact with the spiritual powers involved in the cult.

Boyer ends her argument with quite a strange conclusion:

Paradoxically, the work of those who intend to cast a more impartial light on possession cults will have more visible repercussions on them than esoteric literature [Boyer 1996: 17].

Why? Because the saint-fathers "recognize the power of books"; because "scholarly social status is, without any doubt, a factor in explaining the different 'value' attributed to their books and to those of Afro-Brazilian writers" [*ibid.*: 19]; and because:

One can only understand the negligible effect of writings on possession cults by those who are close to the *terreiros*, if we take into account the specific logic used when dealing with thought. Analysis permits the organization of data in scientific productions, where each stage of reasoning is formally argued, other interpretations are discussed and discarded when they are deemed to be inadequate. Esoteric literature, on the other hand, is characterized by enumeration; the necessary level of rigor for the articulation of the argument's elements is weak and the text, which is another catalogue of formulae, finds its coherence beyond itself [*ibid.*: 20].

Although Bastide is not mentioned here, he would certainly be included in the list of intellectuals suspected of having involuntarily contributed to the codification of African religions in Brazil, simply by having voluntarily searched for African traditions "surviving" among the diaspora. Boyer [1993b] herself suggests this in another paper, and many others place Bastide among those whose work is constantly read by adepts, contributing to "the invention of candomblé" [Despland 2009, among others: see notes 4 and 5].

All of this may be true, but even so, these criticisms ignore a few points to be addressed here. Firstly, there is a lack of systematic ethnographic investigation into how intellectual writings have actually been read and used by adepts of different African religions in Brazil; an investigation into who reads this literature, what they read, and what values they attribute to what they read.

Of course, this doesn't mean there are no important studies on the topic. But even the best one, Lisa Ear Castillo's work, only goes as far as substituting the "Judeo-Christian religious model", where writing is "solely a source of sacred knowledge" [2008: 187] for its "importance as a historical record" [*ibid.*: 188]⁹, a way of not fully accept the specificity of the modes by which writing and reading are put in action in Afro-Brazilian religions.

When this vital work is done, it will probably show that it is neither necessary nor correct to project academic standards onto the people whose singularities are being investigating as if these standards were universal when, in fact, they are hardly even very common.

For instance, in his doctoral thesis on *candomblé* in Recife Arnaud Halloy [2005: 97, 125, 187, 191-194, 645] observes how members of the *terreiros* he studied consider knowledge directly acquired to be far superior, more trustworthy and stable than that which is learned by reading books: they are very suspicious of scholarly knowledge and find it to be too volatile, always escaping memory and requiring constant reading. In my own fieldwork, this hierarchical opposition is also always raised, between those who

were "born in a *terreiro*" and those who "learned in books". To go even further, as observed by Ordep Serra:

One need only talk [with the *Candomblé* people] to notice that they do not receive what is said or written about *candomblé* without criticism [1995: 124].

Instead of projecting our theories and, above all, our experience of the intellectual arena onto the world of African religions in Brazil, wouldn't it be much more interesting to try to learn what we can about these other forms of reading and dealing with intellectual work? As I have argued elsewhere:

[Whoever wishes to learn something in *candomblé* must be] fully aware from the outset that there is no point waiting to receive ready-made teachings from a master. Instead, they must patiently put together details gleaned here and there over the years, in the hope that, at some point, this accumulation of knowledge will acquire enough density to be useful [Goldman 2007: 109].

This is called *catar folhas* (literally, "gathering leaves") and from this point of view, scholarly books are nothing more than some leaves, among so many others.

9. "The reason why the work of researchers such as Ruth Lands, Donald Pierson and Edison Carneiro are much appreciated today in cult houses (*terreiros*), is not because of the information they contain about rituals. It is mainly because they provide testimonials and other precious information about the lives of great figures such as Mãe Menininha, Martiniano do Bonfim, Procópio, Mãe Aninha e Joãozinho da Goméia" [Castillo 2008: 188].

Gathering Leaves

What is it that we can learn from all of this? As we saw above, Bastide pointed in this direction when he stressed something that should be very obvious: that “Afro-Brazilian believers” did not seem to read Nina Rodrigues, Donald Pierson or even Roger Bastide himself for their academic credentials, social and cultural capital, or position in intellectual networks, but rather in virtue of their having entered into direct contact with important priests and sages from African religions in Brazil.

We could thus say that books, such as those written by Nina Rodrigues (or by Bastide or by me), might appear to people accustomed to divine possession and ancestral knowledge transmission as means through which words and knowledge provided by others might flow. These books and these authors would then appear as “mediums” or “horses” who receive and convey something well beyond themselves: the words of the great priests and priestesses, as Pulquéria, Martiniano do Bonfim or Senhora. Words that, as we know, come from elsewhere and carry force and action.

This simply means that we might be able to learn to read Roger Bastide – and anyone else – differently. From this point of view, Bastide could simply be a “saint horse”, in the sense that he carries and conveys the word and existence of ancestral sages. However, as strange as it might seem, I do not regard this as being too different from what should be expected of ethnographic writing. For shouldn't the greatest value of a text, like Bronislaw Malinowski's for instance, be its capacity to

convey the Trobrianders' words, knowledge and life?

Against this idea it could be argued that the theoretical background, ideas and even interests of each author not only interfere in one's writing, but might even determine what is written. Or rather, that no one could be so naive as to imagine that an author is simply a medium for the ideas that he or she presents. But this objection cannot get very far, for (as we know) the behavior of each “saint horse” is modulated in accordance with the characteristics of the forces that traverse her. The horse and the divinity that possesses her are a kind of hybrid or cyborg [Goldman 2009: 116], not mere “individuals” extrinsically connected. If we want to use a Latourian vocabulary, “saint horses” (and ethnographers) are never simply “intermediaries”, that is, vehicles indifferent to what they convey or what crosses through them. They are mediators in a strict sense: they both modulate what they transport and are modified by the act of transporting it [Latour 1993: 79-82 and 2005: 38-40, 59]. Therefore, there is no need to consider here the argument that the anthropologist's “reality” (such as his theoretical ideas, personal interests, aspirations, prestige, social class and position in the intellectual field) should not be confused with native's “imaginary” beings and attributes.

On the other hand, to come back to the beginning of this text, a more “postmodern” position might insist that the ethnographer or anthropologist can only hope to “represent” native words and life in his texts, whilst trances and possessions aim more to present a force rather than to represent a substance.

In this case, it could be replied that the rapprochement between those different modes of learning could precisely help us to escape from the representationalist empire, which post-modern thinkers, themselves, have pointed out as anthropology's limit. Between affirming the impossibility of anthropology due to its representationalism and imagining an anthropology that escapes representation, I can only choose the latter option.

Finally the postmodernist objection vanishes if we think of a book about a great priestess being read not by an anthropologist but by a *candomblé* adept. The interest of this adept for "representation" must be similar to that which he or she experiences when

admiring a beautiful performance by someone possessed by a divinity. However, beyond the performance, what really matters is the force which animates and traverses this performance. In the same way, a book or an author also are or can be felt as "horses-saints" in as much as they also try to present or represent something which is far beyond them: the presence and the force of a great priest or a great idea, who knows? In this effort at presentation, and to finish with a notion that Bastide placed at the center of African religions in Brazil, saint daughters and authors participate in this force and can make others also participate in it.

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Abstract

Marcio Goldman, *Reading Roger Bastide. Deutero-Learning the African Religions in Brazil*

Originally considered a key contribution to the study of African-Brazilian religions, over the last thirty years Roger Bastide's work has come under a series of attacks. In this paper, I argue that most of the criticisms do not consider one of Bastide's main arguments, namely, that the understanding of "African religions in Brazil" depends on the convergence of ethnographic and sociological perspectives, or rather, on the possibility of reconciling the necessity of taking what the natives say seriously with the construction of a broader depiction of these religions. The fact that Bastide kept these two perspectives separate and developed them in two different books, suggests that the issue was never resolved by the author himself. This article suggests that to overcome this difficulty, anthropologists must try to systematically incorporate and explore the particular modes of transmission and reception of Afro-Brazilian religious knowledges: in other words, we must engage their theories and methods of learning.

Keywords

Roger Bastide, African-Brazilian religions, deutero-learning, symmetrical anthropology

Résumé

Marcio Goldman, *Lire Roger Bastide. Deutéro-apprentissage des religions de matrice africaine au Brésil*

Contribution essentielle à l'étude des religions afro-brésiliennes, l'œuvre de Roger Bastide fait l'objet, depuis plus de trente ans, d'une série de critiques. Cet article part de l'hypothèse que la plupart de ces critiques ne prennent pas en compte l'un des principaux postulats de Bastide, à savoir que la compréhension des religions de matrice africaine au Brésil suppose de réarticuler les points de vue ethnographique et sociologique, ou encore de prendre au sérieux ce qui disent les pratiquants et de proposer une description plus large de ces religions. Le fait que Bastide ait traité séparément ces perspectives dans deux livres distincts indique que la difficulté n'a pas été résolue par l'auteur lui-même. Nous suggérons ici que, pour dépasser cette difficulté, les anthropologues explorent systématiquement la spécificité des modes de transmission et de réception des savoirs religieux afro-brésiliens : en d'autres termes, nous devons prendre en considération les théories et les méthodes d'apprentissage des personnes qui pratiquent ces cultes.

Mots clés

Roger Bastide, religions afro-brésiliennes, deutéro-apprentissage, anthropologie symétrique