

“Brazilian historiography and public memory tend[ed] to emphasize the peaceful evolution of history wherein changes are supposed to have been tranquilly and cordially resolved by the elites and the people” (p. 3), but generations of historians have worked to discredit these ideologies. Here Johnson may have missed an opportunity to subject recent historiography to the same sharp and critical eye that she reserves for *Os sertões* and the two novels that did not achieve the same canonical status as da Cunha’s book (and for Antônio Olavo’s 1993 documentary, *Paixão e guerra no sertão de Canudos*, which she presents in her conclusion as an exemplary alternative reading of Canudos that does not relegate – or sentence – it to the past).

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Remembrance of Things Past: The Trope of Africa in Afro-Brazilian Studies

BEATRIZ GÓIS DANTAS: *Nagô Grandma and White Papa: Candomblé and the Creation of Afro-Brazilian Identity*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009;

STEFANIA CAPONE: *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Brazil’s African descendant population, the largest in the Americas, has attracted the attention of anthropologists since the end of the 19th century. Following the tendency of their times, early studies focused on practices that had parallels in the African continent. These practices were understood to be “survivals” that had been transported across the Atlantic intact. Religious practices were of special interest, especially those that were influenced by the Nagô, as the Yoruba were then known, who arrived in huge numbers during the last decades of the slave trade. Most disembarked in the city of Salvador, capital of the northeastern state of Bahia and the most active slave port in the Americas. The African population was greatest in Bahia and the northeastern region in general, but Africans were also found in other parts of Brazil, a demographic situation that persists to this day. Although Afro-Brazilian religions developed in virtually every region, anthropologists focused their gaze on *candomblé*, a variant that arose in Salvador. Over the decades, this ethnographic bias was replicated again and again, also creating a ripple effect that radiated outward to other forms of cultural production including literature, film, popular music and the visual arts.

The genesis of this ethnographic paradigm and its repercussions in Afro-Brazilian religious communities are examined in the two works under review here. Arguing that *candomblé*, as understood by the general public and even

by Afro-Brazilian priests and priestesses, was effectively an invented tradition heavily influenced by scholars and manipulated by the Nagô temples to their own advantage, both authors based their theoretical discussions on ethnographic field work that was conducted in regions other than Bahia.

Originally published in 1988, Beatriz Góis Dantas' *Nagô Grandma and White Papa: Candomblé and the Creation of Afro-Brazilian Identity* explores how ethnographers influenced the objects of their study. Dantas challenges the paradigm of African retentions through a meticulous ethnography of Santa Bárbara Virgem, a Nagô temple founded by a Yoruba freedman in the state of Sergipe, which neighbors Bahia. Santa Bárbara Virgem was held in high esteem by the local black population for its reputation of staying true to African practices, even though its initiation rituals consisted of a brief Catholic-style baptism, as opposed to Bahia, where initiation rites were similar to those of the Yoruba in Africa, with a long period of reclusion that involved head-shaving and animal sacrifice.

Such regional differences led Dantas to conclude that these and other practices that had been considered markers of Yoruba purity were not African survivals but rather constructions that had been influenced by the local context. Bilina, the elderly high priestess of Santa Bárbara Virgem, was the granddaughter of a Yoruba freedwoman (the "Nagô grandma" of the book's title), but she had been raised in the home of a white man (the "white papa"). From her grandmother Bilina learned to value her African origins, but from "white papa" she assimilated European cultural values which were intensified by her lifelong amicable relationship with the Catholic Church. Having internalized these hybrid influences, Bilina believed that the baptism rites at her temple were pure Nagô tradition, that is, an African retention. Dantas reasoned that Bahian religious leaders also must have absorbed external influences, not from white papas and priests but from anthropologists eager to identify African survivals. Thus, in Bahia, the power of suggestion would have reinforced religious leaders' notions of African tradition, even inducing them to portray newly-created rituals as long-lost traditions.

In addition to exploring differing concepts of Nagô purity, Dantas also examines the transition of Afro-Brazilian religions to social legitimization. Historically, African religious practices in Brazil were considered fetishism and sorcery, and were persecuted by the authorities. But by the mid-20th century, the small group of Nagô temples in Bahia studied by anthropologists had made significant inroads in attaining social prestige, while lesser-known temples, many of them influenced by Bantu practices, continued to be viewed with distrust. Dantas argues that this was the result of a sorcery-religion dichotomy created by anthropologists. Nagô practices were considered "pure" and were identified as religious, while rituals that had undergone change in Brazil — as was common in many Bantu-influenced communities — were considered degenerate and as-

sociated with sorcery. This sorcery-religion dichotomy took shape in response to legislative changes at the end of the 19th century after a new constitution permitted religions other than Catholicism to be publicly practiced for the first time. At the same time, a new penal code categorized sorcery and witchcraft as crimes. In Bahia, according to Dantas, this provided the impetus for a redefinition of *candomblé*'s public image. If the stigma of sorcery could be removed, it could pave the way for legal acceptance as a religion. With the support of anthropologists, African purity thus gained important new dimensions as a strategy for legitimization. But since the Nagô temples had served as templates in defining the characteristics of Afro-Brazilian religions, the strategy worked mainly in their favor.

Nagô Grandma was the first published study of Afro-Brazilian religion in Sergipe and is recognized as an important contribution to Brazilian anthropology. Dantas' originality in exposing the theoretical assumptions underlying the ethnographic privilege accorded to the Nagô practices of Bahia marked a turning point in Afro-Brazilian studies, sparking long-overdue interest in other ethnic groups, especially the Bantu, which had also been demographically significant in the slave trade to Brazil. However, she has come under criticism for implying that religious leaders in Bahia passively absorbed the teachings of all-powerful anthropologists into their ritual practice, a claim that was not supported by field data but was based, rather, on a re-interpretation of classic ethnographies.

After the publication of Dantas' book, other anthropologists followed her lead, shifting attention away from African survivals and toward the religious practices of previously neglected regions of Brazil. One such scholar was Stefania Capone, whose *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé* was first published in French (1999), then in Portuguese (2004), and now in English. Approaching the same theoretical questions raised by Dantas, Capone chose as her field locations Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, cities with large white populations. There, in addition to *candomblé* followers who are African descendants, one also finds many light-skinned or white participants. Many of Capone's informants came to *candomblé* in the 1970s after previous participation in *umbanda*. Developed in Rio de Janeiro in the 1920s with strong Spiritist roots, *umbanda* embraced certain aspects of Afro-Brazilian cosmology and rituals while rejecting "aspects that...were associated with the 'savagery' of African cults such as animal sacrifice" (p. 71).

Capone's ethnographic analysis centers on her informants' relationships to the cult of Exu/Elegbara. Seen as a messenger between mortals and the deities of the Yoruba pantheon, Exu is also a trickster who can shift unpredictably from useful ally to cunning, unscrupulous foe. From the Christian perspective, predicated on an opposition between absolute virtue and absolute evil, this complex

entanglement of good and evil resulted in Exu being equated with Satan. This negative image led *candomblé* practitioners to minimize or even disavow Exu's role in the religious cosmology. At the same time, multiple new Brazilianized forms of Exu developed and flourished in *umbanda*, among them two important female deities, Pombagira and Maria Padilha. In the 1960s and 70s, as social attitudes toward *candomblé* became more tolerant, many *umbanda* practitioners migrated to *candomblé*, bringing with them their avatars of Exu and ways of worshipping them. Capone's fascinating discussion introduces the reader to diverse Afro-Brazilian religious modalities and their interrelationships, and also examines the place of spirit mediumship in initiates' everyday lives. Capone's sophisticated understanding of the subject matter is perhaps the strongest element of her book.

Like Dantas, Capone argues that anthropologists were important agents in catalyzing *candomblé*'s increased prestige in Brazilian society. In chapter 6, "Exu and the Anthropologists," Capone traces the emergence of the religion-sorcery dichotomy. Although she places her discussion in the context of ethnographic representations of Exu, the narrative structure, sources and conclusions closely parallel those in Dantas' chapter 4, "Construction and Meanings of Nagô Purity." In Capone's chapter 7, "In Search of Lost Origins," the author cites the work of Roger Bastide to demonstrate a recurring trope in the construction of Nagô purity: a yearning for Africa that anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio has termed a "Proustian nostalgia." In analyzing an oral narrative from one of Bahia's oldest temples, the Casa Branca, about the founding priestesses' return voyage to Africa, Capone dismisses its importance as a source of information about historical events, reading it instead as a calculated strategy for building prestige.

This interpretation, also suggested by Dantas, although less forcefully so, is contradicted by recent historical research into the lives of the Casa Branca's founders. Passport records uncovered in the Bahian archives prove that the founding priestesses' legendary journey to Africa took place in 1837, also proving that Nagô priests based in Bahia traveled to other regions of Brazil to disseminate their own brand of religious knowledge as early as the 1870s. Thus, it seems clear that the importance of the Bahian Nagô religious practices as templates exported to other parts of Brazil came about not through the circulation of ethnographic texts in the 1930s, as both Dantas and Capone would have it, but through the agency of the founders of the Casa Branca temples themselves, decades before scholars came on the scene.

In addition to examining ethnographers' influence over the objects of their research, both *Nagô Grandma* and *Searching for Africa* employ the same conceptual opposition between purity and contamination that they criticize. While anthropologists such as Bastide may have been guided by notions of an original

African purity that became contaminated in Brazil, contamination is still an issue in Dantas' and Capone's work, but the source of contamination becomes the anthropologists themselves. However, these criticisms notwithstanding, both books are important and welcome contributions to the literature available to English-speaking readers on the religious practices of the African Diaspora in Latin America.

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STANLEY E. BLAKE: *The Vigorous Core of Our Nationality*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.

That Brazilian regional identities are racially charged is a truism. From naming practices in cuisine to the possibility of requesting a *gaúcha* at a brothel, elite and popular understandings of these identities belie the idea of a coherent "Brazilian race." Until recently, however, English-language scholarship that hoped to interrogate this idea tended to project São Paulo and/or Rio de Janeiro conceptions of race onto the rest of the country or focus solely on ideas of blackness or Afro-Brazilianness. Studies of immigrants and their descendants who did not fit neatly into the classic black-white dyad helped to complicate these narratives, but regional approaches were still unexplored. Though scholars like Barbara Weinstein have noted that regional difference is "more pronounced" in Brazil than in other countries, the dominant view still remains that of the metropolis.

With *The Vigorous Core of Our Nationality*, Stanley E. Blake aims to challenge the historiographical dominance of "national" identity by privileging the local and the regional. His particular interest is to uncover the autochthonous roots of *nordestino* identity within the racialized ideas of the region's elite during the First Republic (1889-1930) and the Estado Novo (1937-1945). Difference thus conceived appears everywhere from criminology and anthropology to mental and social hygiene programs. Most significantly, Blake argues that northeastern elites imagine regional identity for their own purposes and national interests, and thus contribute to broader conceptions of race and participate in the political configurations of twentieth-century Brazil.

Blake brings a new lens to some familiar actors, analyzing their writings and actions as growing out of or becoming constituent of something particularly northeastern. Intellectuals Raymundo Nina Rodrigues and Euclides da Cunha brought the metropolitan worldviews of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to the Northeast, seeking to understand their experiences in racial terms. These vi-