

Substantial Identities in “Rural Black Communities” in Brazil: a Short Appraisal of Some Community Studies

*Edwin Reesink*¹

Prologue

The original version of this paper was written some time before the Conference in *Manchester* (Manchester '99 – Visions and Voices) that celebrated fifty years of Anthropology at Manchester University.² I presented the paper in a climate that seemed too uncritical of the concept of ethnicity used in most of these studies. As will be discussed *below*, some researchers did not sufficiently support their assertions that a community could justifiably be called “ethnic”. That is, it appeared at times as if race and ethnicity are the same, or as if the essentialized identity of the members of a community justified calling them an “ethnic group”. At that point in time a significant political change was underway in the larger political and legal context in which the communities in question found themselves, which caused the denomination current in the studies discussed here to be mostly abandoned. Most if not all anthropologists who now work directly with these communities refer to the supposed “ethnicity” of the “quilombo” in their academic writings and “expert reports”. The use of the terms “quilombo” and “ethnic group”, a maroon group, derives from the legal imposition of a temporary measure contained in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 (article 68). However, the implementation of this regulation only really began to occur after 1994 and I believe that in 1998-1999 this trend was still vying for dominance. This is what

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inspired the following research. Since these studies marked the beginning of a type of black studies in relation to the current dominant paradigm, I still think it is worthwhile to take a closer look at some of the more theoretical aspects. Unfortunately, despite their utility in charting the larger trend, I cannot pay much attention to the community studies conducted before this epoch. Although I can only touch upon some questions of the later epoch, the discussion here certainly prefigures the relevant subjects open to debate.³

Introduction

One of the newest major research areas in “black studies” in Brazil concerns the ethnographic study of “comunidades negras rurais” – rural black communities. Formerly, ethnographies of Brazil’s black population did not pay much attention to rural communities. As is well known, studies of the black “contribution” in Brazil revolved around African “cultural heritage”, in particular Afro-Brazilian religions. Some of these exhibit a profound cultural continuity with their origins even though there is always simultaneous change and transformation⁴. After Pierson’s study of Salvador, the studies led by Wagley and Thales de Azevedo in the 1950’s are representative of the community studies of that epoch. They paid special attention to racial issues because UNESCO had chosen Brazil as a field of research that might teach the world something about racial democracy. Actually, of course, the image of racial democracy was being constructed since the 1930’s with the invention of a national ethnic ideology, which later became known as the “myth of the three races” (Schwartz 1998). These monographic studies demonstrated, although somewhat optimistically oriented towards the future “solution” of the race problem, that discrimination at these local levels was still strong (Wagley ed.). Even Thales de Azevedo in his study of the colour elite in Bahia was clearly veering to a less harmonic model. Marvin Harris’ PhD study of “Minas Velhas” in the Chapada region identified a very clear racial frontier, expressed in various social conceptions and practices, which separated the “arraiais negros”

3 The anonymous reviewer of the original text raised these points and I certainly agree with their pertinence and even the need to raise them. Yet I think that for the moment the present discussion will have to suffice since such an endeavor would be too lengthy.

4 Today, such transformations are illustrated by L. Parès (2006) study of the origins and successive phases of *candomblé*.

from the neighboring “arraial branco” and the people in town.⁵ Still, most authors were optimistic about the relationship between race and class and the future predominance of the latter over the former. The strongest formulation of this hypothesis, probably that presented by Florestan Fernandes for São Paulo in the same decade, maintained that the impact of class would make the weight of race obsolete, or that acquired attributes would predominate over the supposed personal attributes. The relation between the two requires, however, a major and still not quite satisfactorily resolved research agenda.

Actually, while these studies can possibly be subjected to criticism of all the community studies of these times, they could very well serve as points of departure for revised studies of the same communities from a more recent perspective on race relations⁶. Some new studies have already been done by the research group on Indian peoples of the Northeast to which I am affiliated and were partially published a few years ago (Messeder and Martins 1991). This research group has been occupied for a long time with examining the persistence of the ethnic identity of the Indian peoples of the Brazilian Northeast and the social processes that explain the resurgence of many other local rural social groups of Indian descent that claim an official status of “Indian” in relation to the Brazilian State (with all the advantages and disadvantages such a claim entails).⁷ Our interest in re-emerging groups that claim “Indian” status, both officially and in local regional context, leads to an interest in the similarities and differences between rural Indian and black communities. It is also important to examine relations between the “Indians” and

5 One of the authors whose work is discussed below gives an ample review of “racial relations studies” and the new place of rural communities within this framework (Bandeira 1998: 15-23; see also below).

6 The same idea has been proposed by Lívio Sansone, some time before 1998. At the time, this student of ‘black studies’ in Bahia was planning to develop a research program to examine this idea. Today he is involved in restudying the field of Hutchinson. In 2004, Sansone was one of the organizers of the international conference about ‘50 years of the UNESCO project’ where all of these previous contributions were reviewed. Ma. Rosário Carvalho presented a paper about the black communities of Rio de Contas (in relation to Harris) and I presented a paper about Monte Santo (Zimmerman). See the collected papers in Pereira and Sansone (2007). It may be noted that, to my knowledge, the authors associated with Wagley only used the concepts of race and class, in no way systematically referring to any ‘ethnic group’. They also show the same general fusion of cultural elements of diverse affiliations as undistinguished rural culture.

7 The Programa de Pesquisas sobre os Povos Indígenas do Nordeste Brasileiro (PINEB), at the Departamento de Antropologia and PPGA of the UFBA, led by Pedro Agostinho e Ma.R.Carvalho. Note that this is the oldest (1971) and most important research program about Northeastern Indians, their ethnography and relevant theory.

the “black” population, both in historical and contemporary terms, particularly with respect to the general structures of alterity in Brazil (see Reesink 1999 and Carvalho and Reesink i.p.). This paper focuses on monographs published by a research program at the University of São Paulo (USP), led by João Borges Pereira, who supervised a number of students in what was the largest systematic effort to study this kind of community.

Castainho

Let me first make some comments about Castainho’s ethnographic study of a black rural neighbourhood in the vicinity of Garanhuns Pernambuco, (in the transitional zone between the coastal region and the semi-arid sertão). This is the third study published by the research program led by Borges Pereira, who wrote the preface of what was originally a master’s thesis presented at USP’s Anthropology Program (preface in the monograph of the former student; Monteiro 1985. The fieldwork, however, was conducted in the mid 1970’s). The research program included the study of a number of strategically chosen communities in different states in order to produce knowledge of a neglected but important topic, to complement urban black studies. Borges Pereira commented on the influence of black movements on these studies, particularly that black ideologues view the existence of *quilombos* as a glorious past for *negros*, a resistance made invisible in the official white history that negates black agency. He considers this a legitimate political stance, but maintains that these rural communities cannot a priori be considered a sort of contemporary social formation of *quilombo* just because they are “black rural communities”. In other words, quite differently from the usual situation in Indian ethnology – where in almost all cases the re-emerging Indians count on anthropologists to certify their legitimacy – there is a definite tension between the “facts” and the ethnopolitical perspective of the black movement. Still, Borges Pereira demonstrates this tense interaction by calling for a serene comparison of these ideas with the results obtained by empiric research “(...) *sobre essas comunidades étnicas espalhadas pelo Brasil rural*” [about these ethnic communities spread throughout rural Brazil] (in Monteiro 1985: 10). That is, he warns against the equation of a substantialised “rural community” with a “quilombo”. A good point, although one may additionally ask why these communities are, all of a sudden, classified as “ethnic”.

In a preface to an earlier study, the same thesis advisor states that the objective of the series of black community studies is to investigate the racial or ethnic characteristics that may or may not classify them as differentiated segments of the national peasantry (in R. Queiroz 1983: 12; *Ivaporanduva* in the Vale do Ribeira). The same inspiration for research of the idealisation of black culture and the construction of an ethnic symbol is mentioned, but the author does not compare the ethnopolitical concept and the results of the study. In fact, in this particular study, Renato Queiroz does not in any way mention ethnicity and does not classify the community as an ethnic community. His study, in effect, focuses on the community's economy. No distinctive cultural features are mentioned, only a general participation in local rural culture (*caipira*) and the local conception is that wealth discrimination, which is a question of class, is far stronger than racial discrimination. The community is actually partially racially mixed even though its specificity is seen to be located in the heritage of a certain search for distance, because of the regional history of slavery, and the image of these bad times passed on in oral tradition (R. Queiroz 1983).

Interestingly enough, in the first study by Castainho mentioned, Monteiro also refrains from classifying the community as "ethnic". This rural neighbourhood contains a majority of black people of various families related to each other and living there for some generations and who at times intermarried with non-blacks (whites are actually favoured). According to the inhabitants, the territory was received as a donation for the faithful service of a young slave to his priest master. This was actually one of the common origins of this kind of black peasant community. According to the people of the Garanhuns, it originated as a small *quilombo* or was composed of fragments of other resistance communities. There are no cultural practices conceived as specific to the group, all are Catholics or emulate this dominant religion with the exception of one other religious centre, whose leader, however, learned her trade outside of the neighbourhood.⁸ Other centres rose and disappeared, in part from constant pressure by Catholic priests. The author attributes the disappearance of alternative religious forms to a desire to conform to mainstream society. There is no apparent mode of ethnic or racial

⁸ With respect to alliance policies, the same tendency can be noted by the expression of the wish to marry white outsiders to raise community status.

labelling involved in the original adoption of the outside influences nor in the stigmatizing of this religious expression, other than discrimination and competition in the religious domain. Thus, no distinctive features are recognized and the region is like other “normal” rural neighbourhoods (including a “white” one; Monteiro 1985). Interestingly, then, these older writings from both São Paulo and Pernambuco situate themselves in the tradition of the former “rural neighbourhood studies” (also at USP). Despite being different only in “race”, both are among the limited number of cases in which communities have since been recognized as “quilombos” (Arruti 2006: 325).

In fact, black people do suffer from strong prejudice towards *negros* by whites and city dwellers. The author attributes a tendency to endogamy to a prejudice against marrying blacks.⁹ A simple passage through the city and a very rapid visit to the area (in 1998) proved sufficient to hear about prejudice with respect to blacks and inhabitants of Castainho (and to see the presence of racial mixture). Of course, the research was done before the new constitution enacted in the late 1980’s and its mention of the right to demarcation of the land of former *quilombos*. As mentioned, the national institutional and legal context has changed the possibilities for rural black communities to protect their lands, and the law has caused a variety of discussions about rights and crucial definitions such as *quilombo*. Already in 1999, several academics and NGO’s work to help secure legal aid and favourable judicial decisions for black communities thought of as successors to these rebellious communities. This mobilization occurs especially in cases of imperilled land rights. Both the community and sympathizers are then especially mobilized as was already happening at Castainho.

Another anthropologist, not affiliated to the research group mentioned, initiated research in the community at the end of the 1990’s and came to other conclusions. The historic relation with former *quilombos* was now seen as certain and apparently as one of two versions of the internal oral tradition. On the one hand, the author now emphasized the re-elaboration of oral tradition as to “(...) *its existence with a differentiated ethnic identity*” (Souza 1999:

9 Nevertheless, in this kind of territorialized community where access to land relates to family membership, this constraint acts as another notable force towards endogamy clearly demonstrated in other peasant community studies. The access to land in some way collectively held, presumably lead to endogamy (as in the peasant cases), and its relation to the contrasting wish for out-marrying whites is not discussed.

548), and the conflict over land as a factor that stimulated political mobilization. On the other hand, one finds a definite search for religious features that relate to Afro-Brazilian religion, the presence of which, however, is denied by participants even though it is mentioned that they are reputed to be the best in the region by city dwellers and historically previous centres are mentioned. That is, after clearly stating that, in principle, the community's cultural characteristics do not differ from those in the surrounding rural population, there is a strong tendency to search for distinctive features, even those that contradict those of the participants themselves. Discriminatory remarks made by city dwellers certainly attest to stigmatisation and the external sociocultural construction of a differentiated category of people, but is not yet really supported by a kind of "Afro"-religion as a distinctive feature.¹⁰

The author recognizes these difficulties and it looks as if this lack of clear distinguishing features may in some way compromise the claim that they are descendants of a quilombo. The author does not state this in this manner, but to the reader it appears as if there must be evidence of some kind of culturally distinguishing *negritude*. She reports quite frankly a corroboration of the previous investigation: "*The cultural characteristics of the community of Castainho do not, in principle, differ from the rural population of the region*" (ib.: 550). So one wonders why there is insistence that there was "*enormous persistence*" to maintain its identity, while this has not been shown to be different from other territorially based peasant kindred groups. The "*imposition*" of the dominant religion must have – according to the earlier monograph and no new evidence is adduced – taken place a long time ago even when repeated pressure was maintained to eliminate competing religions during the lifetime of interviewed participants. Therefore the imposed "*substitution*" can hardly be seen as "*superficial*". The diacritical features are mostly sought in the "*deeper social structures*", meaning descent, kinship and oral traditions referring to *quilombo* and slave origin of certain family ancestors. First of all, the question remains whether these and the other factors mentioned, economic control over

10 The description of the religious practice mentioned before not only indicates its outside origin and precarious acceptance inside the community, but also its heterogeneous character, since it includes Indian elements. The attitude towards it by those in the city can easily be seen as an accusation that it constitutes witchcraft according to the usual association in Brazil of blacks with magic (not to mention "black magic"; within a general association of 'marginal' categories such as rural and peasant with magical practices).

labour relations and land, really are that different from those found among non-black peasant groups, which certainly also show social unity and the auto- and alter-classification of a social collective category (the x family of y locality).¹¹ Secondly, the discourse of the participants has already been adapting to the new framework, envisaging the categories needed to be accepted on the macro-level of the state, notably incorporating the term *quilombo*.¹² This particular research had not been going on for a long time and the author states that the complexity of the theme will require much further work (Souza 1999). Yet, she already had produced an anthropological “expert report” in 1997 and this seems to make the difference between her presentation and the much earlier monograph. Her difficulties prefigure the problems in the present production of similar expert reports today¹³.

Cedro

Another study concerns a community in Goiás with a 90% black population. In the preface, the thesis advisor mentions the two previous studies and recounts more or less the same basic information that these raised. This time, however, he credits the author with the original idea of researching “(...) *populations constructing and preserving ethnic communities encrusted in our rural world*” (in Baiocchi 1983: xiii-xiv). To an outsider, this may seem to be somewhat different from the stated research objective already cited. In the book itself, after a general discussion of Goiás State and the history of blacks and prejudice, fieldwork from the same period as the previous studies – the 1970’s – is presented. Cedro is a small community founded by a revered ancestor

11 For the most elaborate description of a “family”, in the sense of a peasant kindred, dominating a territory, preferring endogamy, family purity, suspicion of outsiders and with an oral tradition to match over a hundred years of history as an origin myth, see Godoi 1998; 1999).

12 Given the way this term is seen in the city, either the community did not use the term to avoid stigma – with this possibility not occurring to the ethnographer – or the current introduction is due to the learning process involved in political mobilization and contact with outside support organizations such as black movements. A process in progress as attested by the second author and that either led to the revelation to outsiders of this origin or recreated the very oral tradition in novel terms. As seen, the copying of urban customs had already been a strategy and this second possibility is not really different from the same accommodation to higher level impinging forces.

13 Although I cannot elaborate the point, most of the expert reports for the delimitation of “quilombo territories” by the INCRA, the institute for colonization and agrarian reform, seem to show the problems discussed in the studies examined here.

who had access to land that guaranteed its social reproduction. As in the previous cases, the community was largely but not completely endogamous since the time of its founding. Although the author attributes this to white discrimination, one community member states that they have no complaints about the “*white nation*” (whites as a collectivity).¹⁴ That is, a preconceived view seems to influence the reporting of the “facts” or, at least, further comparison with similar non-black communities would be important.

In the preface, the supervisor contrasts the fact-finding of anthropology with the militant view and discusses the creation of community life formed “*by the racial characteristics of the group*” (in *ib.*: xiv). In this way, race and ethnicity are no longer separated and in this particular study the difference or similarity in these concepts is never discussed. The term race is used more often but at times the term ethnic group is used in a way that definitely seems to suppose their equivalence. This is somewhat odd not only from the point of view of the originally posed research question but also from the perspective of a student of Northeastern Indian groups for whom the foremost socially relevant question is if they are “still Indians”, i.e. if they are justifiably an ethnic group: what is the character of the category used to denominate them and can such a group really be an “ethnic group”.

Once again the first observation of the author’s concluding chapter is that there are no culturally distinctive particularities in Cedro in relation to other similar communities except their racial characteristics – their “colour”. There is a definite notion that the people from Cedro are different, but the way that this difference is socially construed is not very clear. Particularly lacking is a discussion of how the kin-group relates to the land, because it is not sufficient to repeat that the mere property of land gives them a better reputation in the eyes of whites than non-resident, mostly landless blacks.¹⁵

14 Note that the expression “nation” is commonly used in the interior, at least in the Northeast. For example, the peasant kindred studies of three villages in Piauí conducted by Pietrafesa de Godoi (Godoi 1998: 97) found that they saw themselves as one family, one “*nation of people*” descending from the same “old trunk” (as in the trunk of a tree, vegetal metaphors are popular in this domain). She compares this usage with the Portuguese colonial term for Indian peoples but does not want to imply ethnicity: only the conception of a differentiated group with a history to account for their existence. Other such groups receive the same classification (*ib.*: 102). This should be a caveat in the identification of analogous ‘black’ groups.

15 And the so-called ‘blacks’ are lumped together as an ethnic group without any form of justification, as if this is a natural fact. The establishment of a difference between this localized blacks and non-residents, on the other hand, established in a triangle in which the whites are again seen as the major

From some remarks cited, it would seem that the blacks do not recognize any cultural difference nor any sort of impaired social competence and colour is only seen as a distinguishing feature among equals. That is, the difference conceived seems not to be voiced in terms of colour as an acceptable criterion, but one of family and locality. This would be a negation of anything that is usually encompassed in an ethnic identity: no differences are recognized except for kin and locality, as in any other similar neighbourhood. Of course, in general terms (because there are exceptions), whites discriminate and stigmatize blacks. But it is remarked that *mestiços* do not suffer the same restrictions, and it is improbably suggested that they are not subject to discrimination. In sum, contrary to the view given by the author, it appears more likely that what we encounter here is a substantial, corporally conceived inferiority that applies to all blacks. This discrimination produces a gradient of phenotypes that constitute the exterior signal of intrinsic inferiority and, apparently, a gradient of discrimination. This supposed intrinsic inferiority appears somewhat ambiguously epitomized in Cedro's dominant kindred, who at times gain a more positive distinction than the general discrimination of other blacks. On the other hand, the concentration by kindred and locality could be factors that stimulate a densification of discrimination into a more collective characterization of the group without, however, being considered ethnic either by discriminators or discriminated.

Vila Bela

All of the previous studies were concerned with small rural communities while this one is the most elaborate and involves a special situation. Vila Bela grew from a region occupied by slave-owners searching for rapid mineral wealth. When the gold was depleted and the town gradually abandoned – it had even become the capital of Mato Grosso State – the black population was left behind in charge of the town. The difference with the former communities is clear but the gradual abandonment produced a situation quite similar to the other cases because the relapse and redirections of the expansion of the frontier marginalized the town and region (in all respects and thus similar

defining agents only as a function of purely economic interests (and thus questionable), is seen as a mere sub-division, as if creating an induced type of false consciousness and not a relevant distinction to be explored on its own terms.

to a rural situation). The preface by the same supervisor, made this observation and noted that the factor that most distinguished this from the previous studies was the asymmetrical relations within the black group. The study has been praised as the most detailed and founded on an excellent theoretical preparation (introduction by Borges Pereira in Bandeira 1988: 14). For this reason a closer look at its theoretical propositions is worthwhile.

In the author's introduction of the study, after a short review of available studies, some indications about this more general perspective appear. Mentioning the hypothesis that rural conditions were thought to eliminate possibilities for the persistence of culturally specific traits (only race prejudice might remain) and that, generally, the urban situation would offer a better mode of "*cultural resistance forging the formation of an ethnic identity*", the author finds it sufficient to mention the existence of rural black communities in the next paragraph (ib.: 21). Thus, apparently and somewhat confusingly, the mere existence of black communities seems to suffice as counterpoint and as evidence of this formation of ethnic identity. In addition, the urban situation is seen as creating a cultural distinction (in terms of religion and leisure) in what are called "communities" – with no definition of exactly what these may be and no mention of ethnicity. Nothing is presented to relate these differences with political action against "oppression". In contrast, the rural communities are described as enjoying "*total racial conviviality*" and an "*experience of community life in all instances of social life*" (ib.: 22). The difference being their territoriality which, as it were, is seen to bring about a "*specific situation of alterity, a prism which refracts some hidden aspects of these race relations*" (ib.: 22).

Cultural distinctiveness without political expression does not really demonstrate a distinction on a social level that can be shown to be solidified in an identifiable identity/alterity relation. This, in fact, would seem to be suggested as the proper hallmark of rural territorialized groups.¹⁶ This particularity is seen as analogous to a situation in which Indians and blacks are brought into hegemonic contact with "white" frontier expansion. It seems as if the ethnicity recognized for the Indian peoples is, without any real discussion, transferred to the rural black groups. Even when it is noted that the State did not recognize blacks as having the same status as Indians, the frontier as a

¹⁶ The author is not always very clear about some of these points and this is a reconstruction of how I understand the argument.

special case is seen as creating an ethnicity that serves the political mobilization of the community in the confrontation necessary to assure their land rights. Of course, the conflict of a rural community rallying to preserve its access to land and, no less important, its control of the social mechanisms that allow anyone to qualify for access, creates, or rather confirms, the social identity of a territorial group. The point is that other peasant communities in which kindred groups exercise their rights over a certain territory do not necessarily differ in their reaction and in the construction of a political social identity. Kinship identities are also substantialised identities and the black communities discussed usually are constituted of one or more kin groups.

That is, the differential character for black rural groups must be demonstrated, not taken for granted. In this respect, the presentation of a range of cultural contents that support the “ethnicity” constructed is essential. However, the studies of black communities are used as examples by the author to indicate the political dimension of this ethnicity, immediately conflating the struggle for land of these local groups and kindreds with an ethnic group. As seen, the studies discussed do not bear this out. The additional claim that certain cultural practices of black rural groups are defined by whites as “African”, even when not really so, and accepted as such by the black community for the purposes of construction of its ethnic identity, is quite removed from what actually is reported in the studies mentioned above.

After the author’s remarks on similarities and differences with rural communities, a short discussion of the concept of ethnicity follows. The principal citations are of works of Barth, Cohen and Carneiro da Cunha, all of whom tend to view ethnicity as fundamentally political phenomenon in which the cultural contents exhibited by the opposing groups mark distinctions that may be basically political. What stands out in her discussion is the relational character of ethnicity, that is, it opposes the notion of a different culture possessed by each side that exists entirely autonomously from this relation of opposition between them. The argument correctly emphasizes the salient feature in this relation between two different social groups to be the conception of an “observed” cultural difference of oneself and the other by both of the opposing sides.

Notwithstanding the relational and political emphasis given, the notion of ethnic identity remains incomplete: it “(...) *implies a situation of alterity in which the we defines, affirms and explains itself in opposition to others*” (ib.: 24).

It certainly does imply the conception of a relational difference conceived by both sides, even though selective cultural difference is agreed upon as well as contested. The problem with this definition of ethnicity is, naturally, that it applies equally well to any sort of social category as constructed in social interaction. By using a broad definition of the sociocultural construction of the “we/other” opposition, any type of such group would be ethnic, bypassing the main difficulty of ethnicity, the mode in which any we-group is definitively “ethnic” in contrast to other types of similar groups (Banks 1996: 188). Barth is the principal theoretical reference used by these studies but, in close analysis, his concepts do not really resolve this problem, which remains such a contested issue that at least some people surveying the field consider the concept rather overused and either want to dispose of ethnicity altogether or propose to maintain or recreate the concept by the continual revision of its definition and application (ib.: 189-190) or nearly do away with the difference between ethnicity and race (Eriksen 1993). Even Eriksen, however, echoes the general opinion that given the sociocultural continuum and lack of corporate groups in urban Brazil: “(...) it [race] *does not express ethnicity*” (ib: 64). Banks (1996: 189) concludes: “*In the modern world ethnicity is indissolubly linked to nationalism and race, to ideas about normative political systems and relations, and to ideas about descent and blood*”. These will be the concepts concerning us here. And, notwithstanding the difficulties and complexities created by the relations between these concepts, I agree with Wade (1997) that the concept of ethnicity is still useful and distinct from the notion of race.

The main issue with “Barth’s problem” – which is usually unnoticed – is that he defines the substance of ethnicity to be the classification of “(...) *a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and his background*” (Barth 1969: 13). In that case, however, there could be, for example, instances where gender identity is more basic than ethnic identity.¹⁷ The problem is that the emphasis on de-essentialized frontiers

17 Gender as another substantialised identity is closely linked to ethnicity and race because all such naturalizations are embodied sociocultural constructions (see also Banks 1996: 111; Eriksen 1993: 154-6). Rarely, however, as both authors observe, race, gender and ethnicity are discussed together. An innovative conference in 2000 organized by C. McCallum tried to do this, with results still to be evaluated (in my contribution (Reesink 2001) I tried to elaborate on some of my current considerations). In Brazilian ethnic ideology, the Portuguese are strongly identified with male domination and Indians and blacks with compliant females: creating an encounter and clash of individual gendered bodies, and not really a conflict between ethnic groups, which resulted in the current “mixed” body of the average individual

and on the process of classification itself leads to the question of where is the “ethnic” of any class of people, and what is the content of a “most general identity”.¹⁸ What is the origin and background that qualifies as ethnic? Furthermore, ethnic identities gain prominence, so the processes of ethnogenesis and the ethnonemesis (usually defined as assimilation) – when differences are diminishing and diminutive – complicate the application of this definition. In fact, it seems to be the case that the history of assimilation of the original African slaves is still a subject that may need further exploration. First, these Africans were classified with already transformed colonial ethnic identities and then their descendants became classified into a gradient of mixed racialized categories. Gradually, the ethnic character was substituted for racialized categories, both because of the factor of being “born Brazilian” and of the increasing “race mixture” (cf. Reesink 2001). If an ethnic identity is – as in Carneiro da Cunha and later literature more so than in Barth – not only relational but also contextual and situational with a number of possible cross-cutting ties, this should be the focus of research and ethnographic description (as in Barth’s later work on Oman). Unfortunately, as Sansone and Guimarães also have observed, at least until the end of the 1990’s, few Brazilian studies really attempt to do just that.

In this way, the study of a “*comunidade de pretos*” in a town in the Guaporé Valley purports to be an empirical study and certainly provides much valuable historical and ethnographic information. Yet, it seems that for a more thorough theoretical and ethnographic treatment of the “ethnic issue”, as in the case of Cedro, certain important elements are lacking in the main body of the book (and one might say that the quality of the ethnography itself permits this re-examination). The study uses the term “*pretos*” when reporting the term used in self-identification by the black population, but the influence of normal political usage imposes the label “*negro*”, as in the title where the “*território negro*” is contained, and truly besieged within an “*espaço branco*”. This portrayal seems to be related to a political stance taken to represent the “*courage*” the black population displayed in reconstructing its own life, when the dominant layer migrated to more economically promising locations. Part of the reason that a more detailed mapping of current interaction

Brazilian (cf. on national ethnic ideology, Reesink 2004).

18 Barth himself does not discuss this sufficiently (I discuss this more fully in Reesink 2008).

is not presented is the sincere admiration for the historic tradition of a rural town almost completely composed of blacks. This history shows, in fact, that an important economic differentiation was established before the flux of incoming outsiders. Afterwards, class and race become complexly intertwined in the relation between mostly higher class non-pretos and the original preto inhabitants. Interestingly, the author affirms that the pretos interpret any discriminatory behavior as racial yet caused by class difference: “*Social discrimination is confounded with racial discrimination*” (ib.: 263). Note that here the stigma invoked is racial, not ethnic. The local original inhabitants are discriminated as blacks and, the poor members, suffer even more.¹⁹ There appears to be a strong tendency to conflate origin (place of birth), race and class but these frontiers do not always coincide perfectly.²⁰

All this demonstrates complexities that might merit further ethnographic treatment and exploration (i.e. the relations between origin, race and class). This brings us back to Barth’s problem. What about other blacks, for example. First of all: “*The relations of kinship dominate social life in all its circumstances*” (ib.: 155). Kinship furnishes the basis for identification: it “*(...) defines, identifies and affirms the we (kin) in opposition to others (non-kin, even when non-white)*” (ib.: id.; emphasis in the original). An “*(...) objective and corporeal basis, of similar consistency as race, of the definition of ethnic identity*” (ib.:id.). This is certainly a kinship identity of a basic, reified kind. The question still remains whether this is equal to race and ethnicity. Mixed marriages do exist, even when disapproved of by both sides, so there are people who are not pure “black” and situationally ally themselves to either “caste” (ib.: 329, 331). Mixedness and class complicate the “formalization of castes”, that is, clear frontiers (in the final pages “caste” seems to substitute the term “ethnic”). It stands to reason that kin is still kin, and thus “we”, even if it is “racially”

19 “*The experience of racial and social discrimination has been painful and confusing in the violence with which these hit the poor members of the community*” (ib.: 263).

20 Note that place of birth is an important identity. To be Brazilian is to be born in Brazil. Anyone born in Brazil is automatically assumed to be Brazilian and anyone not born in Brazil is automatically assumed to be from the country where the person was born (even with Brazilian parents, this concept is very difficult to avoid). Naturalized people are not “really Brazilian”. See the formula in the papers, e.g. the “Chinese naturalized Brazilian”. Within the country the same obtains (Hence the campaign in Rondônia: “born in Minas, Rondonian in her heart”). State affiliation certainly seems to be considered similarly to “ethnicity” but one might argue that all of the ethnic ideological work of the federal government has been to make “Brazilian” the overarching most basic identity. All “pretos” are ethnically Brazilian and so are non-kin blacks and whites.

mixed. But that does not make all *pretos* seen as “us”: it is quite clear that they have to be kin. Therefore, in this case race does not transform an aggregate of a type of people into a “we-group”. But it makes kin the basis of “ethnicity”, the basic we/them opposition. But then, all peasant kindreds with their own oral tradition, endogamous tendency, their own system for collective appropriation of land and for regulating individual familial access to it and a strong attachment to “our land”, are candidates for recognition as “ethnic groups”. This is to say that simply because a person may be black, does not mean they are recognized as having the same ethnicity. Here the solution refers to a kin inclusion/exclusion by “(...) *amplifying the notion of kinship by including a cultural descent of the community*” (ib.: 155). But the descent of all kindreds is patrilineal, from a known ancestor, and in that sense quite similar to other territorialized kindreds (as already noticed, the best example is Godoi; see Woortmann (1995: part III) who, discussing Godoi and others, proposes a generalized model for these kindred territorialized communities). Territoriality in itself is not a sufficient reason to pronounce distinction.²¹ In all cases of peasant communities, kinship is definitely a significant identification, nonetheless, there is no clear discussion of what, if any, “*cultural content*” enables the transition to the “ethnic identity”. Many communities also possess some distinct cultural practices. The differences between very similar neighbouring communities must be revealed, preferably beyond blackness as an essentialised single singularity.

The general preference infuses the description with a politically inspired bias in spite of the warnings made by the advisor in most of these studies (Borges Pereira). This is not, of course, to say that a political stance cannot be approved. On the contrary, as in the studies of Indian populations in the Northeast, a field where the same author made an admirable pioneering ethnographic contribution in an academic analysis, any political position should be held under control. In this case, one of the most important questions concerns self-identification, identification by others, and the usually conflicting conceptions entailed (not the least important of which are those within these groups).²² Looking again at the case at hand in this sense, cer-

21 As said, the town itself used to be such a territory of almost exclusive black inhabitants. The relative isolation in the past and the fact that agriculture (land) was the basis of the economy, makes this case similar to rural neighborhoods.

22 So, for example, the question whether there is no assimilation and what is the “identity” (Indian,

tain observations throw a different light on the blacks of Vila Bela. They came out of the slave period: “(...) ruined and dispersed, soiled by captivity, with no common ethnic origins, without a collective memory and identity, no social existence outside the structure and organisation imposed by slavery” (ib.: 24). The historical process of opposition to the whites created an identity as *preto* (ib.: 25). But in the process, “white” cultural forms are reproduced and this fact is circumvented by the correct argument that the actual origins are not relevant. However, no indication of how the differences are conceived of is given to justify the notion of “*cultura negra*”. On the contrary, the absence of difference is actually stressed once this is seen as an exercise of free choice: “According to this line of reasoning I explain the refusal of the blacks in regard to their African origins and their past of slavery. The blacks of Vila Bela reinstalled their ethnic group as *pretos*, Brazilians, freemen and equals” (ib.: 33; my emphasis). With no common ethnic origins and memory, a negation of slavery and African origins and the apparent absence of the concept of a distinctive culture, it is hard to identify a process of ethnogenesis instead of the construction of a substantial identity that employs kin relations as basic and, although strongly related to race, are not entirely racialized.²³ No quilombo in any historical sense is described for the people in town, only for the history of the countryside. There is a profound identity, which changes through time, but it is not convincingly demonstrated as to why it should be considered an ethnic one. Using Barth only for the part of his definition that refers to “auto-identification” and “alter-identification” does not resolve this; and the discussion tends to elide the role of “basic identity” in the equations of kin and ethnic group and the overlaps or dissimilarities between race and class.

caboclo or only a “racial descendent”) of some of these populations is a relevant research question. Contrary to the accusation that anthropologists “invented” Indians, the ethnicity of certain groups may be called into question. As, of course, it should be when dealing with the limit of a historical process of forced deculturation and integration, where the ethnic category of *caboclo* might be transformed into the racial categorisation *caboclo* (people who “racially” look like Indians but are not ethnically identified as Indian or *caboclo*). However, the category of “blood” as a substantialised vector of sociomoral characteristics transmits the quality of being different directly to the descendants of Indians.

23 In the introduction, the author (ib.: 21) mentions studies where an emphasis on the persistence of “African cultural traits” may lead to the conclusion that, in their absence, only racial prejudice remains. This indicates the need to address the question of what “cultural content” does enable to transcend the level of kinship. It appears to me the reader is left to reconstruct the foundation of this argument from the ethnography throughout the book.

Cafundó

In all of the former studies, the problem of cultural origins is a problem of the presence of “black culture” in these communities and, more importantly in fact, the problem of the group conception of distinguishing cultural traits publicly recognised as such. In the first cases discussed, the researchers have not found any particularities (although they were not really the object of study) and do not address the question of what truly accounts for a difference. In the latter cases, even with the absence of clear distinguishing “black” features recognized, the researchers still allege the presence of some type of cultural difference. The group conceptions are, as seen, still not convincing as to how exactly these alleged differences are actually socially judged. To conclude the discussion it will be interesting to have a rapid look at the famous case of Cafundó, where a group uses a small vocabulary deriving from an African language. This is a more recent study and not related to the research group discussed until now. The discovery of an “African language” aroused much attention, from the authors (a linguist and an anthropologist), elements of the black movement and others, each with their own motives and ready to see its persistence as a “symbol of black resistance”. Politics, black movement(s) and academics intervened in the analysis and events concerning the community in question: each with their own purposes and interests and, sometimes, with greater or lesser conflict. The attention to the situation was magnified because the community is located relatively close to the city of São Paulo. It must be noted from the start that the authors chart the field of interested agents and organisations and are honestly reflexive about their own place and trajectory in relation to the community and interested parties.

This is another community founded on two landholding kindreds, this time originating from two related ancestors who received the land from a former slave-master. This is a common situation in the constitution of black rural communities (as in one of the origin stories in Pernambuco; as Borges Pereira already pointed out, there have been many ways to obtain access to land). The history of the relation between families of slaves and their masters is well researched with the documents available. In the present, on the other hand, the current sociopolitical situation is, actually, very far from one of a simple use of an “African language” by a united black community that defines itself as “African”, or of “black or African origin”. First of all, the two “families” are opposed to each other and execute different strategies in order

to counter social marginalisation. One is Catholic and has a reputation of not being hard workers, which uses the lexicon as their secret to gain some prestige (It was imported from a neighbouring and similar black kindred group that lost its land base). The other is Protestant and hardworking, and does not use the lexicon. The authors even suggest that one family does not use this means of prestige exactly because the other does. That is, there is, or at least was, not one Cafundó but a clear division in two conflicting parts on a very small land base, one consisting of speakers and another of non-speakers (and the latter emphasize “race” as the differentiating aspect; *ib.*: 213).

In this way, the politically ideal situation of a united black community with “African roots” and identity does not correspond to the picture drawn by this careful, competent and critical research. There is, of course, for one part of the community a clear attempt to compensate for low status by using a secret “African language”. The singularity of its continuous use in daily life presents us a rural community with a clearly recognised “black culture”. Yet, despite the clear exposition of these findings, the authors usually speak of Cafundó as if it is a total unit and not a community where the one half does not exhibit this “black culture” as a distinguishing feature.²⁴ Apparently, for the second kindred, only a substantialised claim can be made to be included in this black identity. In fact, the following general claim is subject to some reconsideration: “*In the particular case of the persons of Cafundó, the “language” adjoins the status of “Africans” to their ethnic identity of pretos and to their social identity as rural labourers*” (Vogt and Fry 1996: 26). At this point in the introduction, the reader is not yet aware of the division in the community. Of course, when similar remarks end the first part of the book, the reader will bear this separation in mind, but in the general observations the implications of this differentiation are not really discussed as to what they mean for the question of these identities.

In fact, the same phrase characterizes being “*preto*” as an ethnic identity (as will be repeated in a few instances later in the book). Once again, the ethnicity of this “black” is not elaborated upon, but is a given established predicate. Both of the kindreds’ strategies hinge upon recognition by the wider social groups outside Cafundó and are determined by the validation of the

24 The interest in the secret language by different agents from the wider society has made for some interest by the second kindred in this speech and may be taken as sign of some future change. The intervention of outside help also has diminished the tension between the two parties.

images projected in this interaction. In this sense, there is no indication that the “hard working Protestant” image is anything but an integration into the wider society (by the other kindred) and that the remaining discrimination will be racially constituted, i.e. a substantialised racial identity and not an ethnic identity. Even for the first kindred, the statement seems too bold. And for both kindreds these cultural practices may be seen as alternative status strategies compensating for a lack of social recognition. The research concentrated on the vocabulary and its sociolinguistic usage, so there is no native discourse to substantiate the claim that its use signifies being “African”, either to the blacks or the surrounding non-inhabitants of Cafundó.²⁵ It would seem likely that the lexicon connects the people, in their own view and in a way to be investigated, with Africa; but this does not necessarily imply that they feel that they are “Africans”.²⁶ Even Candomblé is no longer an ethnic religion, but a universal religion open to anybody for worship or ritual posts, although blood relations and transmittance by kin still seem to be very important in some religious descent lines of the most prominent “houses”. There seems to be no mentioning of being “African” even in the purest descent lines and historically “African” was used to characterize the slaves imported from Africa but not as a denomination of anyone born in Brazil.²⁷

Still other cases are adduced in a sort of treasure hunt, as the irony of the authors themselves suggests.²⁸ Again, this sort of desire, though quite natu-

25 They are about the only ones to refer to international literature about the concept of, in English, “*descending group*”: a “*corporate group*” of descendants of the founder (ib.: 343).

26 And a discourse on the origin of the language is open to interpretation to bear this out (ib.: 191). Moreover, one of the white men who learned the “language” – in spite of certain injunctions against teaching it to outsiders – said that the language was simplified and that the African ancestors who truly spoke the language are long dead. The current generation is not in any way conceived as “African”. For one of these men, its use was attributed to class opposition: as a secret language to counter the designs of the common boss of black and white (ib.: 197-199). In another case, in Minas Gerais, the use of a similar “language” spread from a black origin to general black and white usage as a distinguishing feature of the entire town (ib.: 234-255). As the authors well know, speaking an “African” language does not necessarily imply being “African”.

27 There is, notoriously, quite a dispute about purity present in the religious field of candomblé, involving the preservation of African tradition as a source of prestige in this competition, but no participant seems to identify himself as African and not even necessarily “negro” as an ethno-political label. And the “*Africanisation*” of the religion means “*to return to Africa not to be an African nor to be a Negro [orig.], but to regain a patrimony the presence of which today in Brazil is occasion for pride, wisdom and public recognition (...) a culture that is simultaneously black and Brazilian (...)*” (Prandi 1999: 105). As a universal religion a significant number of participants today are white.

28 S. Queiroz (1998) is an example of how linguists may assimilate certain notions and ideas which

ral, leads to affirming that a rural black neighbourhood in Ceará – after determining that it had no distinct language – preserves its ethnicity by “*stressing race*” and endogamy. As said, apart from being black, that does not signify a difference from other known rural territorial kindreds, which also keep to their own. In another case, the story of a single individual who learned “African” words in his childhood but emphasizes his paternal heritage and explains his predisposition to religious trance in this way, is exemplary of a certain inflection in the interpretation of the black heritage when clear indications point to Indian influence. This person’s own explanation of his capacity is not really accepted, even when it is a normal but not commonly recognized social interpretation: he compares the strength of the “blood” from the Indian side and the black side and maintains it is the Indian heritage that gave him the religious qualities. In this sense, this man’s own preference does not seem to justify stating: “(...) *the narrator, in his case himself being a negro*” (ib.: 222).²⁹ The problem of being of mixed blood and concomitant substantiated ideological identities is really, as the authors themselves plainly recognize, much more complicated, yet lacks further treatment (see Reesink 1999).

In effect, on the subject of religion, the authors clearly demonstrate the insertion of Cafundó in the Brazilian sociocultural universe. Especially when discussing the presence of religious elements that might be classified as Afro-Brazilian but are not conceived of as being African and partake of

are transmitted by anthropologists. She studies the “Língua do Negro da Costa”, potentially a name for a vocabulary that may appear to be an ethnic label – although a new ethnonym created in Brazil. The language is in fact of Bantu origin and the name seems to be a generic name for slaves (and thus would tend to disappear). Other names are, in effect, “*dialect of captives*” or “*language of man*” and do not have ethnic connotations. In fact, 17% of the speakers are white and 26% so-called *mulato* apart from the 56% of speakers classified as *pretos*, but the author states the language to be one of blacks even though various speakers are not aware of its African origins and even attribute its invention to the local people (genealogical amnesia is common). In fact, in a black family kin group of speakers no other “African” trait could be found. Moreover, one of the most respected speakers is white and one of the few persons to refer to an African origin. The language is in reality learned not through family transmission but taught in communal leisure situations that are the occasion of its spontaneous use. In the past, of course, this may have been a diacritical secret language used against white hegemony, but even though discrimination remains and is demonstrated to exist, use of this “special language” – currently limited to special circumstances – and the restrictions of speakers and speech situations mentioned, does not make this trait of the people of this locality a realization of “*their African identity by means of linguistic tradition*” (S. Queiroz 1998). This conclusion of Africanness could very well be the influence of Fry and Vogt, although not, of course, necessarily of their volition.

29 Or, classifying him, from an external point of view as possibly ethnically a *mameluco*, on the previous page. He sees himself as mixed but with his Indian blood as stronger than the black blood (and called “Bahian” at that; this ties in with my discussion in Reesink 1999).

the same general principles of rural or even urban Brazil (ib.: 148-149). Here they avoid an easy tendency to see any non-Catholic ritual practice as “Afro-Brazilian”. This, on the other hand, is usually quite complicated, as in the case of the man of Indian descent, because the Indian religious cultural contribution tends to be subsumed by a black inflection. For example, the rural Catimbó of Alhandra (in Northeastern Brazil, north of Recife) though recognized as of Indian origin, has not been sufficiently analysed as a religion of Indian descendants. This religious phenomenon was forcibly brought under control of the state’s Afro-Brazilian Religion Federation and this organization attempted to direct the “houses” towards a “purer” Afro-Brazilian tradition. In search of the Afro-Brazilian tradition researchers have classified Catimbó and other religious expressions as “Afro” even where they themselves comment that “*Indian influence predominates*” (Doria and Carvalho 1996: 163). Similarly, the same authors, trying to make a case for the quilombo character of Rio das Rãs (Bahia), stress their finding of a new variant of an Afro-Brazilian religion when the reading of the report cited makes it abundantly clear that the black group incorporated “Indian” blood (apparently women) and that the Jurema cult is very probably, as are all of those in the *sertão*, of Indian origin. If anything, some of these manifestations should rather be called Indian-Brazilian or Indian-Afro-Brazilian instead of only Afro-Brazilian but custom usually predominates and the inflection almost always tends towards the “black” side (with exceptions; Prandi (1999: 94) calls attention to the mixed “*Afro-Amerindian*” character of a number of religious manifestations). Yet, what is conceived as being Indian or black (people and “culture”), is related in a field of mutually determining and disputed social classifications that are in flux and must be seen from both these particular contexts and from wider frameworks.

Some final remarks

Borges Pereira conceived of his research program as an academic enterprise to find the empirical truth about communities both hardly known and idealized “*by some specialists or ideologists, especially black people,*” as direct socio-cultural and political descendants of the exemplary quilombos of the past (Pereira 1981: 67). He sought to place the ethnographies in the tradition of earlier rural neighbourhood studies and the earlier black studies in São Paulo

(like Florestan Fernandes, “scientific” but still socially relevant and possibly including a denunciation of a “social problem”)(ib.: 68;71). When he proceeded to evaluate the research program, its first three studies had been completed (those of Castainho, Cedro, Ivaporanduva). Some of the conclusions in his summary, coincide with the review above:

“From the cultural point of view, as defined, the communities studied until now do not distinguish themselves from the other rural neighbourhoods in the regions where they are located. Not any cultural trace or expression that could have been taken as specific to the group studied was perceived (...)” (ib.: 69).

Cultural expressions of “black” origin exist as part of general rural life: “(...) a syncretic cultural climate is created and recreated and consumed by all of a segment of the Brazilian population, independently of race” (ib.: id.). Part of the problem may be the lack of any consistent definition of “black culture”. That leads, actually, to the question of who defines the prescribed conception of any such “culture” and where both groups locate the conceived differences between them. “It is on the level of the opposition between whites and blacks that one perceives more concretely the specificity of the racially distinct group” (ib.: 70). Hence, the discrimination, inclusion and exclusion, and the corporeal negative and positive images substantialised in “race”, fabricate groupness. Groups constituting asymmetrical identities that denounce a social problem (although it must be remembered that the groupness of “whites” is of a socially different nature than that of the localised black kindred).

In this summation, no appeal to ethnicity needs to be made. Observe how this coincides with the two master’s theses (both from 1980) but contrasts with the one doctoral dissertation (1981). Despite the same general conclusion, the latter uses the term “ethnic” quite liberally as an equivalent to “race”. The people from Cedro distinguish themselves from “their ethnic contingent” (i.e. “negro”) by possessing land and being responsible, honest and hard working (Baiocchi 1983: 144). And as to the question of “colour”, at least in one quote the black person does not recognise any valid distinction between “black” and “white” as “persons”, that is, all are equally human beings (ib.: 145). Only the second doctoral dissertation discusses such concepts as race and ethnicity within a more elaborate theoretical framework. However, Barth’s Problem does not appear in this discussion and the social race of the black people becomes the basis for an “ethnic group”. In effect, in academic

texts after World War II, there is a long term trend towards abandoning the word “race” and using “ethnic” in its place, the intention being the denial of the reality of race (Guimarães 1996:256). In Brazil, the substitution of race by ethnic (etnia, étnico) has been quite widespread and found in various media. One can even read in a newspaper that the people of a certain ethnically homogeneous country consist of white, mixed and black “ethnic groups”. Over the last ten years, this trend has become common among social science students in Bahia, who now think that being “ethnic” indicates nothing more than any strong social identity. In some circles it is understood that any kind of territorialized community is by nature an “ethnic group”. The current trend expands, and thus dilutes, the “ethnic group” label to all kinds of communities – and has begun to get the force of the state behind it. Identity politics by the state and “social movements” in favour of socially and economically discriminated “groups” has become a form of ethnic identity politics.

On the one hand, one finds the cultural expression of urban phenomena with clear, “African” elements recreated, at least partially, into “black culture” accompanied by the lack of frontiers and corporate groups. In contrast to the apparent lack of recreated “black culture” – at least conceived of as such, in several communities – one finds what appears to be the charm of rural black communities: with obvious boundaries and the corporate character of territorial descent groups. In their starkest modes, the urban and rural “communities” present either a “culture” without frontiers, or frontiers with no distinct culture. As in Cafundó, there may be, of course, distinctive cultural elements. Yet, “culture” here can only be a diacritical feature if defined as the “culture” pertaining to some “group”. For rural black communities, Barth’s definition based on the organisational content and the boundary maintenance of alterity and self identification solves any problem. Barth’s Problem, the “basic general identity” – or, stated in another way, the fact that the sociocultural construction of cognitive categories always proceeds by creating difference and boundaries – remains unnoticed. Hence the substantialised identity of “race” is easily seen as a supposed ethnicity.

From an outsider’s point of view, the field of black studies demonstrates a generalized tendency to find ethnicity in the substantialised identity that underlies racial notions of personhood in Brazil. For example, let us look at a statement by a foremost student of urban blacks. Compare the very first sentence with one on the same page in the text cited: “*Today, ethnic identity in an*

urban context tends to be eclectic, relational and intertwined with other social identities relating to class, age, gender and locality”; “(...) the eclectic nature of black ethnicity is buttressed by (...) and the fact that blacks are not seen, and tend not to see themselves, as an ethnic minority” (Sansone 1993: 89). In this article from more than 15 years ago, ethnicity only reappears at the very end as “symbolic ethnicity”. In Brazil, ten years ago, the use of the category “negro” was restricted to a minority with respect to certain cultural expressions and in an “ethnopolitical” or political-cultural context (Sansone 1996: 178). The appearance and growing use of the concept of ethnicity possibly shows the strength of the contemporary political correctness of the category “negro”, and, hence, induces adopting the concomitant idea proposed by the social movements that such a classification is “ethnic”. The small black movement uses an ethnopolitical discourse, but its impact used to be minimal outside its own and academic circles.³⁰ Still, a “black” student of the social sciences in Bahia, when criticizing recent academic work on “black ethnicity” in Salvador, felt it necessary to begin his paper by stating that if he was not “black” himself, his later criticisms could easily be misconstrued as “racist” (1999).

Of course, such ethnicising politics have been going on for some time and Borges Pereira made that quite clear. In 1981 he stated: “As black communities they cannot be put into the category of quilombo unless new dimensions are given to this concept” (Pereira 1981: 68). He wrote this before the key year of 1988. First, this year – the 100th anniversary of the abolition of slavery – saw strong public interest in black history – this influence is observable in the book published in the same year.³¹ The major concrete change refers to the

30 It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the ethnicisation of blackness in a country of “blackness without ethnicity” (title of a later book by Sansone, orig. 2003, here 2004). Apparently, both because of the urban ethnopolitics of “Africanising” blackness and the fluidity of the concept, this ethnicisation still haunts most of the pages of this newer book. In addition, blackness can only be ethnicised by racialising and inverting the dominant values and, by the loss of specific ethnicity, appealing to a general “Africa” (as shown by Sansone; see also Agier 1996).

31 As a hypothesis, this circumstance could be thought of as an inducement to ethnicise blackness. After all, a strong inspiration for the whole research effort clearly came from the idealization of the “contemporary quilombos” into which, for example, Cafundó immediately entered (after being “discovered” in 1978, as discussed by Vogt and Fry). The relationship between social attention in society, the force of a social movement and science is not that straightforward, however. One would have to look further than I can here. By coincidence, a year earlier, Brandão (1977) published his master’s thesis on rural blacks in Goiás and recognized their ethnicity based upon the definition used by Barth (cited, with a small error, in English) and the works of his supervisor, R. Cardoso de Oliveira (“interethnic friction”). So here is an early example of both the tendency to ethnicise blackness and to model the

temporary clause in article 68 of the new constitution which regulates the recognition of the land rights of “remanescentes de quilombo” (implying descent, but also with some association of residue - remnant). This changed everything. The result was visible in the second study of Castainho and in the critical stance of Vogt and Fry against social “shortcuts” by certain social actors: how can discriminated communities receive social justice if the large majority need “*the new dimensions*” in order to qualify for a right they should possess independently of any proven origin? How can the collective rights of any local kindred or community system of land appropriation be guaranteed when the law only recognises individual property?³² A dispute for the definition of quilombo ensued. Anthropologists supporting the cause amplified the notion and in 1994 a commission of the Brazilian Anthropological Association decided that the new concept of ethnicity should be that defined by Barth. Actually, the commission was forced to do so by legal necessity: the government began to require that expert reports be produced that validate the community as “quilombo”. This was a response to the civil society entities that were working on behalf of these communities with their own definitions (Arruti 2006: 92). A pragmatic definition inspired by Barth reduced identification to the features of “organizational type” and the process of inclusion/exclusion that constitutes boundaries. The acceptance of a community as a “quilombo” then shifted to the notion that the auto-identification of the participants should suffice (just as had already been proposed for the Indian peoples) (ib.: 93). This raises the point that, as one militant publicly recognized, no contemporary community classifies itself as a “quilombo”. They have to be taught to do so and accept the denomination in order to benefit from the new law (ib.: 83). As Arruti clearly affirms (although not in exactly these terms), in this way, practice formed a definition to attend to the imposition of the demands of the judicial system to operationalize the law. And, thus, a definition was propounded that was not the

analysis on Indian ethnicity. Incidentally, despite an interesting and ample discussion of Barth by way of Cardoso de Oliveira, Barth’s Problem remains untouched.

32 It looks as if, although substantiating this assertion would take another article, the response of the identity politics mentioned is conditioned by this legal framework and the example of “descendants of quilombo”. Still, this excludes thousands of other “normal communities”. In the case of Arruti, his expert report produced changes in the elaboration of communal history and the notion of being different from “normal communities”. And only race, as a substantialised identity, can furnish a basis for the lack of self-identification (e.g. ib.: 95; 324)

result of any profound anthropological reflection (ib.: 96). Ethnicity seems to have been the concept found to encompass all rural black communities and make them eligible to achieve the recognition of their rights to land. Arruti astutely reviews the complexities and nuances of the history of the theory and practice involved in the transformation of rural black communities into “ethnic” quilombo groups. It falls outside the scope of this article to discuss this next phase, but it can be anticipated that the author himself calls for far more anthropological reflection of the whole process (producing expert reports, not academic reflections). Yet, he concludes by asserting that the subordination to the judicial field, he himself outlined so clearly, merely provokes the need for a dialogue without “*being captured by judicial logic or the state apparatus*” (ib.: 97). To a non-expert, from Arruti’s own description, the anthropology of the field now appears quite subordinated to legal issues and his call for reflection seems overdue.³³ In contrast, the studies discussed above made important contributions to the understanding of a previously neglected kind of community. They raised significant questions about and gave specific answers to what kind of origin, discrimination, lack of recognition, social organisation, race or ethnicity is found in these communities. In some ways, they are a counterpoint to the later authentication of quilombos. Consequently, a great many issues arise from this new phase. Not the least of which, incidentally, are the dangers inherent in ethnicising and using models used for Indian peoples (as pointed out by Arruti, implicit and explicitly; ib.: 291; 310).³⁴ Perhaps one way to address these issues would be to review the configuration of concepts. Paraphrasing Bateson, when is a difference that makes a difference an ethnic difference? or a racial difference, a kinship difference or a class difference? One needs to investigate a configuration of substantialised (kin, race), essentialised (ethnic, though potentially with a significant substantial component) and achieved social identity/alterity (class).

33 Ironically, Borges Pereira was a member of the commission but could not participate in the meeting mentioned (ib.: 332).

34 Indian peoples may be impaired in their rights when analogies transform the black community into a “federal ethnic group”, as if the “quilombo” is on the same level of basic rights. Arruti (ib.: 310-1) shows how a federal attorney considered the Xokó people and their “quilombo” neighbours to have the “same property rights” and the “same cultural and ethnic auto-affirmation”. This is a complete distortion of the law and of the Indian rights that legally prevail over any “property claim” from any segment of Brazilian society.

It does not seem to be enough to consider just the substantial identity of raciality, the native conception of “race” (even though it still seems to be quite “substantial” in the sense of existing, solid, strong). Like Barth’s Problem, back to basics now means back to the complexities and convolutions of reality; to a very diversified and enormous array of rural black communities in their internal and external sociocultural relations and the nominal and legal impositions of the state; and to the study of the relational, contextual and situational character of the substantial identities of Brazilian personhood.

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