

# Vibrant 7.1

## Presentation

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Déjà Lu is where we customarily publish in translation texts from Brazilian anthropology which have been particularly important in generating new ideas and subsequent work. In a number of Vibrant dedicated to sexual diversity and religion, we were rather surprised and saddened that no articles on Afro-Brazilian possession religions were submitted. In order to go some way to filling this serious lacuna, we have therefore chosen to include Ruth Landes' "A Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality" (LANDES, 1940), where she begins by observing the presence of "passive homosexuals" in the less traditional *candomblé* houses (*candomblé de caboclo*) of Bahia and ends suggesting that they do so in order to partake of the femininity which pervades the Afro-Brazilian possession religions. But she also suggested that their success within the *candomblé* allowed them to overcome the prejudice against them and to acquire considerable power and prestige. In that way they would overcome the author's prejudiced view of "passive homosexuals" in Bahia, who, she says, "solicit on the street in obscene whispers and make themselves conspicuous by mincing with sickening exaggeration, overdoing the falsetto tones, and using women's turns of phrase. All their energies are focused upon arranging the sexual act in which they take the female role." (Ibid: 387)

Arthur Ramos' furious critique entitled "Foreign Research on the Brazilian Black" (RAMOS, 1942) was published two years later. Ramos was one of Brazil's most powerful anthropologists and collaborator of Melville Herskovits. It is a blistering attack on Landes' research and in particular on her claim to have found a relationship between male homosexuality and the possession religion of Bahia. "A falsetto by Artur' Ramos", by Landes' friend and fellow anthropologist Edison Carneiro, who had collaborated with Landes during her Bahian field work was published after Ramos' death. (CARNEIRO 1964) In it, Carneiro defends the quality of Landes' field work

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1 Arthur Ramos' name is spelt with or without an "h".

and her finding that there was indeed a relationship between male homosexuality and *candomblé*.

Ruth Landes is not strictly speaking an example of Brazilian anthropology (however you like to define this rather vague and nationalistic term) and yet, like all successful ethnographers, she clearly benefitted enormously from the collaboration of Edison Carneiro. This rather sad episode appears to reveal more of personal animosity and hurt feelings than matters of theoretical importance. Yet the dispute with Arthur Ramos does also reveal moral, political and theoretical differences as well. It is possible that Ramos, friend of Melville Herskovits and follower of his view that an awareness of African culture would be fundamental for combating segregation and prejudice, felt that associating “passive homosexuality” with *candomblé* would somehow diminish its positive image. After all, there were few intellectuals in Brazil as elsewhere at that time who would be prepared to challenge the widespread belief that homosexuality was at best an illness and at worst a severe moral deviance; even fewer who would have disagreed with Landes’ own description cited above. The fact that Landes thought it correct to describe and analyse the presence of “passive homosexuals” in certain *candomblé* houses suggests that she did not consider that it in any way “diminished” the importance of that religion. I would venture to suggest that she, like Nina Rodrigues, Edison Carneiro and Franklin Frazier, was less concerned with establishing continuities between Brazil and Africa and more interested in understanding *candomblé* as a contemporary *Brazilian* institution.

Whatever the case, Landes certainly set the cat among the anthropological pigeons, especially those mainly concerned with establishing the continuity between Africa and *candomblé*. Like his collaborator Ramos, Herskovits himself in his 1947 review of Landes’ book *City of Women* questioned her field work credentials and chided her for overstressing the homosexuality of male priests: “There are many ‘orthodox’ as well as caboclo priests who have no tendency towards inversion.” (Herskovits 1948: 125) For his part, Roger Bastide, another celebrant of the reproduction of African culture in Bahia, although recognizing that cases of “passive pederasty” were “very common” in certain *candomblé* houses in Bahia, brushed them aside as “pathological cases”. (BASTIDE 1961: 309)

Nevertheless, subsequent work has vindicated Landes’ position. René Ribeiro, who had studied for his master’s degree with Herskovits at

Northwestern University, wrote an article about homosexuality and the Afro-Brazilian houses of Recife, in which he began by citing Landes at length and then demonstrates a similar widespread belief in the association between homosexuality and participation in the Afro-Brazilian houses of his native Recife. (RIBEIRO 1982[1969]) Like Landes, he argued that “overt” and “covert” homosexuals and people with “thwarted sexual identity” were drawn to the religion “to display their mannerisms or to identify with female deities in congeries led by homosexuals”, or “they may also be pushed by other complex motivational needs of compensation for the frustrations imposed on them by their positions and interactions within the larger society”. (IBID.: 119) Seth and Ruth Leacock noted that male homosexuality and the Afro-Brazilian houses of Belém but did not elaborate on the issue. (LEACOCK and LEACOCK 1975)

Subsequent research has further vindicated Landes’ account of the close relationship between *candomblé* and male homosexuality and has been concerned to offer alternative interpretations. In my own work in the 1970s, following on from the work of Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, I argued for a relationship between two marginal statuses (the Afro-Brazilian houses themselves and young effeminate men (*bichas*) who sought out men for sexual relations) and magical powers associated with both. (FRY 1986) J. Lorand Matory (MATORY 1988) contested my interpretation from a more Herskovitsian perspective arguing forcefully that the “effeminacy” of the cults had to do with West African conceptions of trance which as in Brazil is based on notions of penetration. Patrícia Birman (BIRMAN 1995) took Landes more seriously than I had done, arguing that it is indeed trance which marks femininity, both in the women and the men who *dance* and become *possessed*. Just as Landes and Carneiro had observed that male homosexuality was evident in the *candomblé de caboclo* but not in the more traditional houses, so Luís Felipe Rios (RIOS 2004) has identified a similar opposition in contemporary Rio de Janeiro, where houses aiming towards traditional respectability tend to avoid allowing men to enter into trance. Again, following Landes and Birman, he notes the performance of femininity by the men who dance and enter into trance and in opposition to those who, in playing the drums and commanding certain ritual processes perform their masculinity.

Ruth Landes’ and Edison Carneiro’s pioneering work on male homosexuality and the *candomblé* of Bahia bore, and continues to bear fruit.

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