

Foreign research on Brazilian Blacks¹

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Anthropological research conducted by foreigners on the problems of our country has not always shown the kind of scientific honesty, which should characterise work of this kind.

During the 19th century and at the beginning of this one [20th century] a number of incorrect opinions were emitted by foreign scientists, especially on topics such as race, population and the climate. This is so well known that I need not waste time spelling them out again.

Unfortunately such opinions and superficial judgements on our problems have not come to an end. And this is the more lamentable when such opinions are expressed by university-trained specialists.

It is true however that the situation is quite different nowadays. There is a sincere and honest desire for objective knowledge of our country not only through technical observation but also through dissemination through publications. For this reason what was in the past a rule is now an exception.

It is about one of these exceptions that I discuss in this commentary. An anthropologist from the University of Columbia, Miss Ruth Landes, doctor in anthropology, came to Brasil in 1938 with the intention of studying the Blacks. She sought me out in Rio de Janeiro where she told me that she would be carrying out research among the Blacks of Bahia.

She brought me various letters of recommendation from North American friends of mine and for this reason I had no doubt about introducing her to various friends, even to persons of authority who would be able to help her in her research. When she left for Bahia I saw her no more. I learned from third parties that she did not present the letters I had given her to the administrative authorities of Bahia and that for this reason she suffered some

1 Ramos, A. (1942). Pesquisas estrangeiras sobre o negro brasileiro. *A Aculturação Negra no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro, Biblioteca Pedagógica Brasileira.

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embarrassment when she had to explain the nature of her work. This is probably one of the reasons for her having become so full of rancour for the Bahians and the Blacks, which was reflected in everything she subsequently said and wrote about the Blacks in Brazil.

I never saw her again. I had no more knowledge of her plans. I can affirm that when I saw her a few times in Rio de Janeiro, her knowledge of the bibliography on Blacks not only in Brazil but also in North America was virtually zero. It was her first contact with the question. She came here determined to find “black tribes” with whom she could carry out her studies.

Her ideas on the “method” of studying the sexual life of the Blacks were truly hare-brained. This “method” is so unscientific that it will be impossible for me to say here what it consisted of.

Because of all of this pre history of Dr. Landes’ studies on the Blacks of Brazil, her initial conclusions, some emitted verbally and other unfortunately in print, on the social psychology and cultural survivals of Blacks in Brazil came as no surprise to me .

In her observations the author refers to “unknown Blacks in the far reaches of Mato Grosso”, affirming that in Brazil the Blacks gather in “nations”, explaining that these are tribes both in Brazil as in Africa. These two statements could suggest the false notion that there are savage black tribes in Brazil as in Africa. Such is absolutely not the case. The Blacks of Mato Grosso migrated from Minas Gerais and São Paulo when the mines were discovered in the 18th century and they are now integrated with the white community as is the case of all Blacks in Brazil. There are only a few groups of people descended from Black and Indians , the so called *cafusos* or *curibocas*. Of these, only a few groups are mixed with the Indian population of central Brazil.

And further; she states more than once that black religious cults in Brazil see themselves as secret societies, “terrorists in Rio but working for the good in Bahia”. Such affirmations would lead us to believe that the black cults in Rio are terrorist in contrast with the Bahian cults which are peaceful and beneficent. The situation is in fact otherwise. The Blacks of both Rio and Bahia try to hide their religious practices initially from their masters during the period of slavery and nowadays from the police. It is for this reason that religious practices have become private and esoteric, even appearing at times like secret sects.

The error in Dfr. Landes’ observations is due to the fact that the so called “rogues”[*malandros*] of Rio de Janeiro are not all Blacks but also of

mulattoes and whites. Their “bad” behaviour is not related to religious practices nor any other ethnic or cultural factor. It is simply the social consequence that can be observed among the poor classes who live in the areas of the *mala vita* of all big cities.

During her research in Brazil the author made the strange discovery that there are “werewolves”, Blacks possessed by “wolf spirits”, who attack, devour and assault unwary travellers who appear in their path, adding that in Rio they are being hunted down by the police (!).

In fact the belief in werewolves exists in Brazil, springing from both Portuguese and African traditions. But I have never come across the belief leading to acts of attack and robbery, much less in Rio. In the Northeast there is a belief that people who suffer from worms and consequent anaemia may turn into wolves on certain nights. But neither there nor in Rio there have never been criminal acts as suggested by the author.

The assertion that black religion in Bahia is a domain of women while men are involved only in “witchcraft” is very strange and not confirmed by those who have studied black religion in Brazil.

In reality, this alleged distinction does not exist. Both men and women may be cult priests in Bahia. And both women and men may practice magic and “witchcraft”. During my research in Bahia I have known various famous female practitioners of witchcraft who practise evil magic.

As a result of this affirmation we find confirmed and exaggerated the idea that the climax of female power in the cult can be found in Bahia where the women have “absolute control” [sic] over religious and political life.

She then goes on to assert the existence of a “Creole matriarchate” in Bahia which she says she has set out in a special manuscript and to which she refers frequently in her work. This is absolutely not the case. It is not true that in Bahia the women maintain “control” of the black cult. There are as many famous “fathers in sainthood” as “mothers in sainthood”, as has been amply documented in the work of Brazilian researchers from Nina Rodrigues to ourselves. Indeed, the best known cult leaders in Bahia as in other parts of Brazil are men, as may be confirmed in the two Afro-Brazilian congresses, and in the registry of African sects in Bahia.²

² See “Novos estudos Afro-brasileiros” e “O Negro no Brasil”, Biblioteca de Divulgação Científica, vols. IX and XX, and also my own studies condensed in “O Negro Brasileiro”.

In the old Bahian “terreiros” of Yoruba tradition it is the father in sainthood who enjoys most prestige and who controls the cult; these functions have been inherited directly from the cultural organizations of the Gulf of Guinea, with their patrilineal traditions, their totemic roots etc. In Nigeria, priestly functions are a masculine prerogative where priestly hierarchies are complex.

In Brazil, these functions have been reduced to only one: that of “father in sainthood” (*babalorixá, babalaô, etc*). The woman is a partner, her role is secondary, as in Africa. Only more recently has her role in the cult houses has become more relevant due to changing social conditions. This may be observed in Bahia and other parts of Brazil, but we may not speak of a “matriarchate”!

Referring to the use of poison among Blacks, the author claims to know of cases in Bahia and Harlem. One must clarify that the use of poison by Blacks as part of their magic was relatively frequent during slavery. These days it has totally disappeared. I worked for seven years in the Forensic Medicine Service of Bahia and never saw a medical report on criminal poisoning carried out by Blacks. Nor do Blacks carry out poisoning in Rio as the author affirms. Dr. Landes also alludes to sexual promiscuity among the Blacks of Rio. In fact there is no such sexual promiscuity, rather common law unions [*mancebia*] as in all the poor areas of the cities due to economic hardship...

I have left to the end the author’s most sensational “discovery” namely the existence of ritual homosexuality among the Blacks of Bahia with the argument that she had found the habit of cross dressing very common in religious and secular ceremonies with a sexual meaning related to the cult; and, even further, that homosexuality is frequent among the fathers “in sainthood” because it is related to their priestly ambitions since only in this way may they compete with the “mothers in sainthood” (!).

The observations and research of Brazilian scholars invalidate such fantastic conclusions. There is no ritual or religious homosexuality among the Blacks of Brazil. What the author saw in Bahia were a few individual homosexuals who coincidentally had religious functions. This is a purely *individual* phenomenon and has nothing to do with religious practices; there is no ritual or cultural meaning attached to it. I myself know some homosexual fathers in sainthood, as there are also black, mulatto and *caboclo*

homosexuals who have nothing to do with the cult. The isolated cases that the author observed have therefore no ethnic or cultural meaning; they are not related to any African tradition. And I have no evidence that Blacks practice homosexuality out of priestly ambition. It seems as though the author's hurried conclusion is a corollary of her thesis of a black matriarchate in Bahia... as if the men wanted to imitate the women priests to be able to enjoy their prerogatives.

In the books of some of my collaborators there are indeed references to homosexual fathers "in sainthood"³, but these cases are simply phenomena of *individual* sexual deviance and have no relation to the cult or black religious practices.

As far as transvestism if concerned, this is relatively common in popular festivities in Brazil, some private (as in some *afoxés*), other public like carnival. During carnival in Rio and elsewhere transvestism is quite frequent, that is the tendency for men who wear women's clothes, without leading to the conclusion that it has anything to do with homosexuality... It is possible that in some cases individuals practising transvestism may give vent to their homosexual tendencies. But this does not allow us to conclude that the entire group is homosexual and much less that the phenomenon has a ritual or cultural-religious meaning.

In sum, Dr. Landes' conclusions suffer from errors of observation, hasty assertions and false or falsified concepts concerning the religious and magical life of Brazilian Blacks. It is lamentable that some of these conclusions, such as for example, the black "matriarchate" and the female control of religion in Bahia, and the ritual homosexuality of Brazilian Blacks are circulating in academic milieux and that their publication in academic journals has been announced. If these assertions apparently based on observations during long term fieldwork are published they will bring deplorable confusion to the honest and carefully controlled studies of the personality of Blacks in the New World.

This has unfortunately already happened. The July number of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* carries an article authored by

3 See figure 3, on page 40 of Edison Carneiro's book *Negros Bantus*, Biblioteca de Divulgação Científica, vol. XIV, 1937

Dr. Landes entitled “A Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality”⁴, in which she develops precisely her thesis of ritual homosexuality among the Bahian Blacks.

The author begins by citing the cases of passive homosexuality, which, called *berdache* she says existed among certain North American Indian tribes during the 19th century and occasionally associated with ritual duties. She also refers to a communication of Dr. Ralph Linton about the presence of homosexuals among the Tanala of Madagascar, concluding that in our own civilization both active and passive homosexuality has suffered strong repression. From this reading of the author, one infers that homosexuality is a natural phenomenon, which is tolerated or even encouraged among primitive peoples and also related to religious, social and magical ceremonies among such peoples, in some cases defining the social status of the individual concerned.

With such convictions it is natural that the author came to Brazil with her spirit prepared to discover practices of ritual “homosexuality” in black “tribes”. To begin with we might reply to the author about such dangerous generalizations. In the first place, the diffusion of homosexual practices among primitive peoples, and which determine the status of certain individuals has not been verified. Secondly, the Blacks of Brazil are not “primitive” peoples in the sense we give to this term in anthropology; the author herself must have verified that people do not live in “tribes” as she had originally thought, with such a strange ingenuousness in a trained anthropologist.

Let us insist on the principal thesis, that there is ritual homosexuality in Bahia, that she says she saw and has proof thereof. The gist of her theory is as follows: in Bahia it is the women who dominate the religious scene; the “mothers in sainthood” are responsible for the cult and that their control of religious and political (sic) life is absolute. Secondly, as a consequence of the absolute prestige of the women, men end up with the practice of witchcraft related to the *mala vita*, in its pejorative sense. The old *babalaôs* no longer exist. Therefore, when a male individual desires to recover lost prestige he may follow only one route: to imitate the “mothers in sainthood” in their clothing (hence the transvestism), and even in their sexual practices (thus the passive

4 Ruth Landes, *A Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality*, the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 35, no. 3, July, 1940.

homosexuality). Proof: half a dozen homosexual individuals which she affirms are within the Bahian *candomblé*, and whose names she publishes in her article.⁵

I have already given facts and arguments that invalidate her supposition. From the time of Nina Rodrigues to the present, the “fathers in sainthood” have been the main people responsible for the *terreiros*. The gradual prestige of the “mothers in sainthood” is related to a simple economic question. Since “fathers in sainthood” are frequently impeded from attending cult sessions because of their daily work routine, the “mother in sainthood” took over his cult functions while the “father in sainthood” maintained his prerogatives. So much is this the case that the most prestigious *terreiros* of Bahia keep the tradition of old and respected “fathers in sainthood”. On the other hand, the presence of homosexuals in the *candomblés* has no religious or ritual significance, but is due to individual sexual deviance as I mentioned earlier. The same argument can be applied to transvestism in carnival. But we can take our critique further, looking to the very cultures of origin data that would confirm or invalidate the existence of a matriarchate” in the cultures of the Gulf of Guinea, or of “passive homosexuality” which derives from the ambitions of the men to acquire the *social* status of the women.

Here there can be no doubt. All the researchers of African cultures insist on the existence of patrilineal organizations among the people of Benin and the Yoruba, precisely those people who most influenced the surviving black cultures of Bahia. The people of Benin [Dahomey] are organized in great patrilineal sibs.⁶ The men dominate the scene. The principal chief, the *xenuga*, is the oldest man of the group. Old women indeed have the right to be consulted but their authority is less than that of the old chiefs. They are not heard in public⁷.

The principal cult leaders are men and their roles are hereditary.⁸ The women make up the majority of the cult members. In his time, Burton estimated that one in four women were *vodunsi*, that is, devotees of the *vodun*. The most plausible explanation for the majority of women in the cults is

5 Id., *Ibid.*, pages 394 onwards

6 Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, An Ancient West African Kingdom*, vol. 1, New York, 193, Page 137 and onwards.

7 Id. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 10

8 Id. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 1

because, says Herskovits, “it is easier for women to leave their daily tasks than for men...”⁹ This is the same explanation we gave for the case of Bahia—that the predominance of women, daily greater, is a general phenomenon with no relation to the hierarchy of the priestly caste. Would this not be true of all religions?

If we turn to the people of Nigeria we find more or less the same state of affairs., since the cultures of Benin and Yoruba culture are so similar. Yoruba people are also organized patrilineally as has been observed by the majority of researchers from Ellis to our days. The man dominates the social, religious and political scene. He is the head of the *sib*, he is the high priest, and he is the king.

Ellis observed that the priests, mainly men, were divided into three orders. In the first order were the *babalawos* or the priests of Ifa, the priests of the gods of medicine and the priests of *Obatalá* and *Odudua*. Among those of the second order were the priests of Shango and other orishas. The third order is made up of the *Orishako* and the semi Gods, and divinised saints.¹⁰ In Brazil, as I have already demonstrated,¹¹ these various categories have disappeared, leaving a single social personality who could not be a woman, but a man, powerful chief the owner of the *terreiro*, the “father in sainthood” with different titles in different regions of the country, (*babalaôs*, *pais de santo*, *babás*, *babaloxás*, *candomblezeiros*, *macumbeiros*, etc.). The “mother in sainthood” (*ialoxsá*, *ialorixás*) is a secondary creation; her functions are more limited, as Brazilian researchers have observed.¹²

In other words, among the Yoruba the men are predominant in the religious life. There are, of course, women priests, but their functions are more limited, chosen for specific tasks.¹³

More recent research undertaken by William R. Bascom in Nigeria confirms this data.¹⁴ Dr. Bascom has never come across ritual homosexuality

9 Id. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 177

10 A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba speaking peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*, London, 1894.

11 A. Ramos, *o Negro Brasileiro*, 20. ed., 1940, p. 59.

12 Id. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

13 See also Stephen S. Farrow, *Faith, Fancies and Fetish or Yoruba Paganism*, London, 1924, chapter VIII, pages 92 onwards.

14 W. R. Bascom, “*Secret Societies*”, *religious cult groups, and Kinship units among the West African Yoruba*, *Summaries of Doctoral Dissertations*, vol. VII, Northwestern University, June-August, 1939, pp. 43-

among the Yoruba. On one particular occasion men dress as women in Ife¹⁵, but this does not mean we can speak of homosexuality. It is the festival of *Odun Agbon* (coconut palm) in honour of *Osara*, who is identified with a small lake in Ife. According to legend, in the olden days, ife was covered in water and was inhabited by *Osa* and *Okun*. Odua tried to expel them to Lagos, but in spite of this the original spring remained in Ife and has never dried up. It is in this little lake that sacrifice is made to *Odun Agbon* in the spring. When *OPsara* was alive she desired to have children and a *babalawo* advised her to sacrifice four coconuts (*agbon*). She did this and bore a child. To show her gratitude she inaugurated the festival to commemorate the birth of her child. The children of Ife were called *olosara* and learned to hold the festival for *Odun Agbon*. This is why each year the followers of *Olosara* shave half their heads to show their royal origin, adorn themselves with palm leaves and wear female clothes to dance in honour of *Olosara*.

But this is an isolated case related to a special cult and festival. It did not spread elsewhere in Nigeria; it remained specific to Ife. There is no evidence that it spread to Brazil.

All the data from Brazil and Africa invalidate Dr. Landes' fantastic conclusions about a matriarchal cult and male ritual homosexuality among black Brazilians. She merely generalized from isolated observation, thus compromising people as individuals or even probably members of perverted groups—which must be carefully verified—but who are not related to any cultural phenomenon whether derived from African culture or developed in Brazil as a result of cultural change and acculturation.

47—information not included in this publication were given to me personally by Mr. Bascom.

15 Personal communication.