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Review/Reseña

Beatriz Góis Dantas, *Nago Granma & White Papa. Candomblé and the Creation of Afro-Brazilian Identity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Scholars and the Faithful in the Shaping of Afro-Brazilian Religion

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Provocative, wide-ranging, and field-defining, this volume by Beatriz Góis Dantas marks a very welcome addition to the cadre of newly translated Latin American texts by the University of North Carolina Press. Although Dantas originally published *Vovó Nagô e Papai Branco* in Portuguese in 1988, the work still retains its importance in the field of Afro-Brazilian religion and for scholars of Brazil more broadly. Indeed, in re-

reading the book for this review, I am struck anew by its insights and by how much contemporary scholarship remains indebted to it. If anything, its importance has perhaps only grown over the years, becoming a pivotal point of reference for later scholars and, all too often, a straw man for revisionist studies. Dantas was among the first to propose what many since have begun to take for granted: that the world of Afro-Brazilian religion has been carefully shaped by both practitioners and scholars, and that its development often has had as much to do with real world considerations as with spiritual dictates. That the idea of such religious traditions as “invented” now appears a commonplace is a tribute to the importance of her work.

Dantas frames her study by citing the dilemma that arose in her early research forays into the world of Xangô, the term used for Candomblé in the Northeastern state of Sergipe. After being invited by a *mãe de santo* (religious leader) to study the most “traditional” *Nagô terreiro* (temple) in the small town of Laranjeiras, Dantas was puzzled to discover that the West African traditions held by the group showed significant deviation from those considered to be the most traditional in Bahia. While Bahia is often considered the epicenter of Brazil’s African connections, the puzzle for Dantas was that both groups claimed to be entirely faithful to authentic, pure Nagô traditions. This discovery led her to question the use of the terms “tradition” and “purity,” and indeed, to try to explore why they became such important categories for scholars and practitioners alike. As Dantas argues, the idea that Afro-Brazilian religions merely preserve African traditions represents a highly idealized view of a religious marketplace that is immersed in, not apart from, society at large. In other words, African traditions have not been passed down in static ways, but have been used strategically by religious practitioners enmeshed in the reality of Brazil. More importantly, Dantas proposes that an ideal of purity came to dominate the religion as a measure of status due not to any real reflection of fidelity to African practice, but rather due to the priorities of both believers and scholars.

Critics of Dantas have often charged her with giving excessive agency to the latter category. Her work, when perverted, becomes a case in

which practitioners of Xangô are seen as having little importance or say in shaping their beliefs. Yet such a critique truly does a disservice to the work, which in fact does pay attention to the construction of tradition by practitioners. While her study does not give them exclusive agency, neither does it invent academics as all-powerful agents of meaning. Rather, Dantas builds her conclusions from experience in both worlds; her fieldwork and her analysis of the construction of the field serve to inform one another. This is developed over a series of chapters, each of which attempts to approach the question of legitimacy and Africanity from a different perspective.

Chapter one is intended to survey the religious scene and provide some critical background of the practice of Xangô and its *caboclo* (mestizo) competitors, termed dismissively by the former as “Toré.” Dantas attempts to establish why some *terreiros* are more respected than others, using data primarily from interviews of “insiders” as well as “outsiders” (unfortunately, the scope of her interviews and these terms are never fully defined). She also seeks the answer to a question that is basic, yet difficult to explain: why do people practice certain types of faith in contrast to others? This chapter reads a bit disjointedly, as it attempts to sketch background, explain theoretical assumptions, and also analyze the data concerning hierarchies of the religious scene. But the conclusion that Dantas draws here is that there is an agreed upon ranking of *terreiros* by those who frequent them, and that this ranking extends beyond its core members to society more broadly.

Chapter two is more unified in its focus, and uses as its chief source the life story of one religious leader. Umbelina de Araújo, or Bilina, heads perhaps the most prestigious *terreiro* in town, Virgin of Santa Bárbara, and extensive interviews with her provide the material for Dantas to begin to address questions of African roots. As Dantas shows, Bilina emphasizes her connections to Africa especially through her close relation with her maternal African grandmother, who took a primary role in shaping her life. Yet as Dantas shows, such an emphasis on this particular figure serves a variety of prosaic purposes that result in the elevation of Bilina to the head of the *terreiro* in a contested bid for power. Throughout Bilina’s narrative,

the connection to Africa becomes the ultimate indicator of what is desirable in a terreiro. More broadly, Bilina refers constantly to her practice in oppositional terms, setting up her own as pure, and connected to forces of good, while disparaging others for their mixture, or their involvement in evil.

Chapter three examines further how Xangô relates to other local competitors in the religious field, as viewed principally by Bilina. In her view of *caboclo terreiros*, mixture creates evil, and “anarchy” (71). Similarly, she views both Umbanda and Protestant practice with distaste, and sees them as incompatible with a faithful practice of Xango. What is interesting, however, as Dantas highlights, is that coexistence and mixture with Catholicism is seen as acceptable, and in many cases, even desirable. The rituals of the terreiro are frequently described by Bilina as parallel to those of the Catholic Church, and members may venture back and forth between the faiths without any spiritual reprobation or confusion. Indeed, the practices are not just parallel, but rather often intertwined: the African ritual calendar is suspended during times of Lent, and stories of Catholic saints enter into explanations of spiritual inheritance within Xangô (80-2). Here, then, the notion of African purity and admonitions against any spiritual mixture become worth questioning: purity is a central category for structuring belief, but certainly not consistently defined within the terreiro. In Dantas’s view, this can be understood more clearly when notions of purity begin to be seen as shaped also by ideals of goodness (as opposed to evil). Thus, Xangô and Catholicism are both seen as belonging to the realm of goodness, whereas other faiths are relegated to evil. Crossing back and forth within one realm is thus permissible, but to mix goodness with evil is not. Dantas concludes that the notion of what one can mix with is socially defined—society’s hierarchies are replicated in the belief system of the terreiro itself.

In the fourth, and longest, chapter Dantas brings these ideas together and attempts to locate their origins historically. She argues that heightened concern with Africa, and with purity, can best be seen as a formative part of the Northeastern regionalist movement of the 1930s. Comparing the new “glorification of Africa” of this era in both Sergipe and

Bahia, she proposes that such trends masked social problems and even served as a “strategy for the domination of blacks” (96). Here Dantas examines the role of various scholars in discussing African traditions and their studies of Candomblé specifically. Surveying the early work of Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, she shows that many of his prejudices and his Nagô-centric interests were picked up by Artur Ramos and others in the 1930s. The framework used by this next generation of scholars took up use of familiar oppositions of purity and mixture, but also developed new oppositions that contrasted religion with “sorcery” or “magic.”

Dantas’ argument here is important, as she shows that scholars viewed the practice of Candomblé in Manichean ways that not only ranked different terreiros in academic terms, but also participated actively in making these rankings public. This was done most obviously through their interventions in protecting select religions from official persecution. But the Afro-Brazilian Congresses of 1934 and 1937 are also developed by Dantas as two public forums in which scholars acted aggressively to endorse some faiths at the expense of others and to valorize African connections above all. The end of the chapter turns to critical questions that continue to trouble scholars of race in Brazil. How has the idea of racial democracy affected the black community? Or more to the point: how has the cultural valorization of black and African culture coexisted with (and perhaps enabled) disturbing levels of black disenfranchisement? If Dantas does not answer these questions to our complete satisfaction (at least for this reader), she does provide much food for thought.

The final chapter of the book examines how the setting of Laranjeiras has influenced the development of Bilina’s terreiro. A wealthy sugar town in the nineteenth century, and a somewhat decadent region at the start of the twentieth, the city has struggled to define itself in terms of its tradition. This tradition, of course, has been selectively defined, and Dantas here examines how Bilina has worked within the culture of the town to ensure the survival and the esteem of her practice. As a whole the chapter’s discussion of power strategies sometimes appears too reductive, and often veers uncomfortably close to functionalist. It would be easy to finish the chapter and conclude that all religious practice is determined by

the need to attract elite clients and by power struggles to distinguish one terreiro as superior to its competitors. While both trends are undeniably important, their exclusive focus here leaves little room for belief, spirituality, or faith, the ultimate core of any religion.

A few technical critiques of this translation bear mention. It is unreasonable, of course, to expect a scholar to significantly revise a work to be translated more than twenty years later. Yet a new introduction or preface is often expected, and it would here prove useful to the reader. It would be interesting to hear Dantas' own reflections on the book in her later career, and it would be fascinating to hear her engage with some of the revisionist approaches to her work. In addition, the translation does the reader few favors. The text is peppered with awkward phrasings so that one often has to read a sentence repeatedly to be sure of its meaning. Moreover, literal translation occasionally leads to errors. This and the complicated nature of the chapters themselves mean that I would be reluctant to assign the book to undergraduates. Although there is a generous glossary that proves useful, many of the terms (*Malê* and *caboclo terreiros* to give only two examples) could be better introduced and explained to be more accessible to those who have not read extensively in Brazilian history and religions. Graduate students and scholars will still get much out of it, but it is a pity that the book remains somewhat inaccessible for an entry-level audience.

Overall, Dantas' strength comes from her ability to hit upon dynamics that other scholars continue to grapple with, and to provide cutting insights on an incredibly wide-ranging array of themes and debates. These insights continue to inspire, as recent publications reveal. To cite only two recent examples, the work of Stefania Capone takes up the story of Exu, a spiritual figure of ambiguous evil-doing, to interrogate the meanings of African tradition. And J. Lorand Matory has turned his attention to the notion of invented purity in Candomblé to attempt to uncover its transnational origins. Despite her ability to point to many important questions, however, Dantas is sometimes less successful at developing individual points and in marshalling evidence to make each of her smaller arguments fully convincing. Her ability to touch insightfully on a wide

range of topics is thus both her greatest strength and also occasionally a source of weakness. Nonetheless, despite such shortcomings, one cannot help but be impressed with how much Dantas takes on in the work, and her many gems of analysis still make for a thought-provoking read.

As one might expect, scholarship has inevitably shifted since the original publication of this work. Perhaps most significant is that scholars have increasingly recognized the role of individual leaders in the Afro-Brazilian religious world. This tendency comes in part as a natural result as scholars have begun to deconstruct notions of tradition long held sacrosanct. As we begin to recognize the human activism and agency behind what becomes accepted religious practice (and what doesn't), the individuals responsible for fashioning orthodoxy come into greater relief. American anthropologist Ruth Landes was one of the first to reveal the power of individual leaders, portraying with vivid human detail the rivalry and jostling for power that came from very real personal divisions and tensions in Bahian religious life in the late 1930s. And Bahian anthropologist Vivaldo da Costa Lima also dedicated early attention to the activism and personalities of particular figures in Bahia such as Aninha and Martiniano do Bonfim. The particularly energetic activism of Mãe Senhora in more recent years has made this process perhaps even more visible. But the attention to historical trends in religious leadership has perhaps been slower to spread outside of Bahia (and outside of the most studied terreiros).

The work of Dantas gives us an early vision of why this trend proves so important. Her work reveals the initial tendencies of scholars to sometimes conflate the personality of a given leader with the identity of the terreiro more broadly. The balance here is delicate, for Dantas surely points to the many personal motivations that shape the fashioning of practice and "traditions" in the terreiro she studies. Yet there are still attempts to make the personal *representative* that begin to blur the lines between the identity of the individual and the faith itself. This elision between priestess and terreiro can be seen, for example, in the way that Dantas titles her chapters. Chapters two and three are titled "Nagô Speaks of Itself" and "Nagô Speaks of 'the Others.'" Yet these chapters are dedicated (as described above) to

examining how one person, Bilina (the *mãe de santo* of the most prestigious Nagô terreiro of the region), views her own life and leadership and how she views rival faiths. Thus Bilina becomes not just a particular spiritual leader, but also a representative for her terreiro in a broader (and more timeless) sense. The way Bilina views others becomes, in this formulation, the way in which the entire religious spectrum of rivalries is framed. And the source base for Dantas further reinforces this tendency, as the book relies especially on this one informant and her formulation of the world through extensive interviews with the author. What is ironic, considering the critiques most often made of Dantas, is that, if anything, she exaggerates rather than minimizes the agency of *some* practitioners, and fashions out of Bilina a voice of much larger authority than might be merited. What remains for future scholarship is an approach that gives weight not only to scholars, and to individual religious leaders, but also to the larger question of the faithful. Many, including Dantas, have referred to the intense pressure for spiritual leaders to cater to seemingly fickle “masses” in a competitive religious marketplace. Who are these practitioners, and how have their needs, demands, and beliefs shaped the religious world? A fresh approach that takes these believers seriously may well serve to put the agency and power of scholars and religious leaders into new (and perhaps more limited) perspective.