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Afro-Brazilian Religious Suppression in 1920s and 1930s Rio de Janeiro

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INTRODUCTION

Pinning down the history of any religion proves, at the best of times, elusive. In the case of Afro-Brazilian religions, it becomes nearly impossible. Not only have African religious customs blended with those of European and Indigenous religions over time, but those new, syncretic forms have themselves snaked around, emphasizing varying components, adding new ones, and shifting away from others. It is into these turbulent waters that this paper wades, by first looking at the history of scholarship surrounding Afro-Brazilian religions, and then turning to look at some of the social forces and challenges that Afro-Brazilian religions faced in Rio de Janeiro from the mid-1920s through the 1930s and the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, which emerged in 1930 and influenced all aspects of Brazilian life.

During this period, women, the backbone of Afro-Brazilian religions, were given social roles, that did not fit the reality of the Afro-Brazilian religious context. The practice of magic and spiritism for healing and divination was outlawed, and in neighboring cities, religious possession was seen as a form of mental illness and vigorously persecuted. Additionally, individual Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Brazilian religions were vying for legitimacy in a system that had not completely recovered from the end of slavery, and the entire legal structure was changing under the transition to dictatorship under Getúlio Vargas. Academics have taken an in-depth look at each of these factors, but they have largely ignored the ways that these forces worked together to produce an overall pattern of injustice and persecution. Only by understanding those forces both individually, and as a whole, can the nature and scope of the situation be understood.

Ironically, in contrast to earlier persecution, the last few decades have seen a rise Afro-Brazilian religions as an ubiquitous symbol of what it means to be Brazilian. Remnants of

African religions brought over to South America during the height of the African slave trade fused with indigenous Amazonian religious practices and European-dominated Catholic traditions as a means of slave survival in the unfamiliar Brazilian landscape. These traditions, however, remain elusive—each house of worship differing slightly from the others. The names attached to these religions are equally elusive, referred to alternatively as Macumba, Umbanda and Candomblé by different people, or at times by the same person in another context—Macumba, Umbanda and Candomblé can refer to both widely disparate, and at times identical, forms of worship. Yet while today, academics and individual practitioners may use these words interchangeably, in 1930s Rio de Janeiro, these names served as powerful symbols dividing the authentic from the inauthentic—and by extension, legal and illegal—religious practices in the eyes of the Brazilian authorities, academic elites and the religions themselves. While authorities were attempting to control what they felt was the immorality of their largely poor, Afro-Brazilian *favelas*, academics were attempting to create a hierarchy of Afro-Brazilian religions in keeping with their contemporary ideas of race relations. Into these divides, religious practitioners and priestesses began defining their religions as more legitimate and more African than the others. In the end, Macumba and Umbanda lost out, becoming associated with “magic,” a term in this case used derogatorily to signify insignificance, while Candomblé triumphed as a pure, unadulterated African religion.

There are sadly many things that this paper cannot deal with. Information on the beliefs and practices of Afro-Brazilian religions is not only scarce, but fraught with misconceptions and racial bias. In addition, this paper only discusses the legal framework of Rio de Janeiro in broad strokes, in an attempt to cover the widest possible range of forces that influenced Afro-Brazilian

religious practice in the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, I have been unable to discover whether or not any personal records exist from the people who experienced this persecution of religion first hand—although I would be surprised if traces could not be found by those with the resources to find them. It is this last area where the need is greatest for additional scholarly contribution.

SCHOLARSHIP

Early Academic Scholarship

Before this paper can discuss any issues in detail, however, it is important to look at the history of academic literature that has been written on the subject, from the time of our study in the 1920s and 30s, through to the present day. This literature will serve as the background for this paper's investigations. If academic literature in the 1930s was attempting to define the role of each Afro-Brazilian religion in its larger sociological and anthropological context, the 1970s represented the decade when academic practitioners of these “magic” religions began fighting back, producing quasi-academic literature that attempted to explain or defend their religion to an academic audience. In turn, this trend, coupled with changing ideas of race relations in Brazil, has led to modern scholarship that analyzes the earlier academic trends that legitimized and condemned Afro-Brazilian religions as part of a larger debate surrounding race in Brazil in the 1930s.

Of all the Brazilian academics writing on the subject of Afro-Brazilian culture in the 1930s, Arthur Ramos is perhaps the most iconic. His book, *Negros in Brazil*, translated into English in 1939 by Richard Pattee discusses the role of the “Negro” in terms that would come to

be closely associated with Gilberto Freyre, the preeminent sociologist.¹ Ramos, Freyre² and a whole host of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic set out in an attempt to discover and define what it meant to be a 'Negro' in Brazil. They, in turn, had been influenced by the work of the American sociologist, Robert E. Park from the University of Chicago whose work on race in Brazil popularized the concept of Brazilian racial 'whitening'.³ One of Park's theories was that religious groups could be divided into civilized and primitive, and that primitiveness in turn created an atmosphere of exclusivity in relation to the assimilated whole. For example, in his introduction to Bertram Wilbur Doyle's 1937 book, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South*, he explains how “restrictions on intermarriage still persist and continue to make of the Negro and endogamous social group, in much the same sense that the Jew, the Mennonites, and any of the more primitive religious sects are endogamous.”⁴ Negroes, and by extension their inferior religious practices, should not mingle with Europeans or superior whites.

The 1930s Brazilian intelligentsia, led by Ramos and Freyre, then began to attack a host of 'primitive' and syncretic religions that they considered inferior. For example, in chapter seven of *Negros in Brazil*, “The Cultural Heritage of the Brazilian Negro: Religion and Worship,” Ramos compares Macumba to other Brazilian religions as “the least interesting of these survivals so great is degree of intermixture and adulteration in contact with an elaborate and complicated urban civilization.”⁵ Ramos accuses Macumba of being a religion less sophisticated than its urban—and in this case European—counterparts. Here he condemns Macumba for a lack of

1 Arthur Ramos, *Negro in Brazil*, trans. Richard Pattee (Washington D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1939).

2 Gilberto Freyre, *Brazil: An Interpretation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945).

3 John H. Stanfield II, *Black Reflective Sociology: Epistemology, Theory and Methodology* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2011), 102-3.

4 Bertram Wilbur Doyle and Robert E. Park, “Introduction,” in *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: A Study in Social Control* (1937; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1971),, xxxiv.

5 Ramos, 81.

sophistication, while later in the chapter he attacks it for failing to exhibit spirit possession in a “violent form,” claiming that it is “more feigned than real” in comparison to Candomblé.⁶ He claims that Candomblé was practiced “[i]n regions far removed from the cities, hidden in the wild interior, [and thus] the African tradition was carefully preserved.”⁷ For Ramos, the authentic, although in his view unsophisticated African traditions carried more cultural weight than their mixed-ethnic counterparts. The 'authentic' African religions were not mixing with the white populations, and contaminating European religion. Thus, while Candomblé may have exhibited more “primitive” forms of religious behavior, it was viewed by scholars as superior, because it was more “authentically” African and did not threaten the status quo.⁸

Ultimately, Ramos and others' negative publicity, in conjunction with police suppression, submerged Macumba and other syncretic religions underground. There is no doubt that the ideas of superior and inferior religions permeated the academy and influenced the way Brazilians viewed many Afro-Brazilian religions. Many of these views of superior and inferior religions continued in the work of French sociologists in the 1960s and 70s. This suppression, nevertheless, failed to diminish the actual practice of these religions by the population at large.

Unlike their American predecessors, French scholars and quasi-academics began to reexamine the usefulness of syncretic religions in Brazil. The most famous of these French scholars was sociologist and Brazilophile Roger Bastide. In his 1967 work, *African Civilisations in the New World*,⁹ Bastide differentiates between the Candomblés whose “ritual differs little from the African practices current among these Bantu sects,” and Macumba which “in Rio and

6 Ramos, 92.

7 Ramos, 82.

8 See discussion of Kelly E. Hayes below.

9 *Amériques Noires, les Civilisations Africaines dans le Nouveau Monde*

the state of Guanabara is a wild rout of *eshú*, *orisha*, disembodied souls and *caboclos*, produced at random by casual invocations or spontaneous trances.”¹⁰ Although Bastide praises Ramos in his section on African Spiritualism, he differs from him by referring to both practices as ‘religions.’ He thereby helped to remove the stigma of ‘magic’ that Ramos and others had created in the 1930s.¹¹

Quasi-Academic Literature

Moving from academic circles, to a form of quasi-academic literature, the account of another Frenchman, Serge Bramly, who visited Brazil in the early 1970s, clearly showcases the changes that had taken place in the years between Ramos and Bastide. This book has its flaws—Bramly transcribed from memory interviews that he conducted with the Mother of one specific house of worship. Nevertheless, his introduction offers a unique glimpse into the way Brazilians in the 1970s viewed the practice of Macumba. On the very first page of his introduction, he echoes Ramos when he says that the Brazilians describe Macumba as “a corrupted version of African animism: a naive, chaotic hotchpotch of superstitions and beliefs.... As to its current practice, they view it as an antiquated effort on the part of blacks to preserve their integrity, a kind of blind sustenance in adversity.”¹² Here Bramly speaks of the corruption of belief, the futility of holding on to these magical practices, and a frustration at the religions’ slow process of ‘whitening.’

Bramly spent several years in contact with one specific Macumba center because he

10 Roger Bastide, *African Civilisations in the New World*, trans. Peter Green (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 85-6.

11 Bastide, 168-9.

12 Serge Bramly, *Macumba: The Teachings of Maria-Jose*, trans. Meg Bogin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 3-4.

observed an interesting phenomenon. Brazilians were quick to distance themselves from the practices of Macumba and other Afro-Brazilian religions, yet even his most secular friends participated in yearly festivals or believed in the power of the curses and the religious symbology.¹³ Thus, we find that while Ramos and his fellow academics were successful in removing what they considered the unsightly Afro-Brazilian practices from the public eye, this academic onslaught had neither killed the religions, or dampened the Brazilian enthusiasm for them—an enthusiasm which had its origins in Brazil's slave past, where some masters encouraged their slaves to practice their religions to boost morale,¹⁴ and many religious ceremonies had wealthy white patrons to ensure that the slaves would not be persecuted during the rituals.¹⁵

Bramly's book is also important because it represents one of the first attempts to rescue Macumba from the academic scorn that it had received in the first half of the twentieth century. It is the first in a long procession of quasi-academic literature later written by people with a close, personal belief or proximity to these religions in Brazil. Their writings serve as redemption testimony to the importance of these religions. One of the more recent additions to this genre is an article written by Nei Lopes, a musician and amateur scholar of Afro-Brazilian culture.¹⁶ In his 2004 article, “African Religions in Brazil, Negotiation, and Resistance: A Look from Within,” Lopes, a follower of Umbanda, looks at how the scholarship of Freyre and his contemporaries attempted to destroy the foundations of the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition.

13 Bramly, 3-6.

14 Joseph A. Page, *The Brazilians* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 356.

15 For more information on slave-master relations see: Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond, ed., *The Masters and the Slaves: Plantation Relations and Mestizaje in American Imaginaries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

16 Nei Lopes, “African Religions in Brazil, Negotiation, and Resistance: A Look from Within,” in “African Descendants in Brazil,” special issue, *Journal of Black Studies* 34, no. 6 (July 2004): 860.

These scholars, working closely with the government, helped define legitimate and illegitimate religious practices—the latter of which were violently suppressed.¹⁷

Like Bramly, Lopes attempts to put a human face on the religious practices with which he is emotionally linked. Lopes, however, as a black Brazilian, goes one step further and vindicates Umbanda and all other Afro-Brazilian religions by embracing the syncretism in Umbanda and Macumba. In his view, these religions survive despite official suppression because practitioners of these religions “understand that the neotraditional African religions in Brazil will know, as they have always known, how to resist by negotiation, for very often negotiating is also a form of resistance, and continue to work toward the cohesion of black people.”¹⁸ Here, Lopez is directly defying Ramos in asserting not only that negotiation and syncretism are positive aspects of African religions in Brazil, but also blatantly rejecting the concept of 'whitening' by proudly embracing his African heritage—even those aspects that Ramos and Freyre found to be inauthentic expressions of Africanism.

Current Scholarship

While the value of these very personal accounts of Brazil's African religions cannot be understated, it is also important not to overlook the recent scholarship by Kelly E. Hayes, the preeminent modern scholar of Afro-Brazilian religion. Like Lopez, Hayes directly attacks the 1930s authors who were complicit in the persecution of these religious practices. Without a thorough reading of Hayes, Ramos cannot be understood. By scouring the police records of the time, Hayes asserts that academics had the power to determine which religions would be

¹⁷ Lopes, 855.

¹⁸ Lopes, 859.

supported, and which would die.¹⁹ For example, Ramos argued that Macumba practitioners were engaged in black magic,²⁰ yet after 1927, Afro-Brazilian religions believed to practice black magic were subject to persecution by the police—and the police looked to the academy to make distinctions between these religions. In Hayes estimation, the academic traditions of the 1930s and 1940s created a climate wherein Afro-Brazilian religions began fighting one another for legitimacy. Each labeled the other as primitive, eschewed animal sacrifices and hid behind wealthy, white patrons.²¹ The net result was that certain terms, like Macumba, came to symbolize “those forces that threaten public notions of order, stability, and the social 'good'.”²² Officials were aided in destroying Afro-Brazilian traditions by practitioners themselves, who vied with one another for elite protection.

Yet despite the suppression by police, and cultural in-fighting, Macumba and other “illegitimate” forms of Afro-Brazilian religion did survive this persecution. They were practiced widely through the 1970s, but remained largely underground until the 21st century, when they flourished and again became the subject of academic inquiry. In addition, black Brazilian authors are attempting to repair the damage to the reputation of syncretic Afro-Brazilian religions that authorities threatened to eradicate nearly a century ago. This new generation of practitioners is defending their beliefs before a broader audience of academics and Brazilians in order to regain their lost legitimacy. Academics continue to aid their efforts—a late, but nonetheless, welcome development.

19 Kelly E. Hayes, “Black Magic and the Academy: Macumba and Afro-Brazilian 'Orthodoxies',” *History of Religions* 46, no. 4 (May 2007): 294.

20 Ramos, 81.

21 Hayes, 312.

22 Hayes, 314.

OTHER CHALLENGES

Academic scholarship in the 1920s and 30s was not the only force acting upon the Afro-Brazilian religious communities. A whole host of other social, political and economic forces were working in concert to create an environment that not only attacked these religions, but also the very fabric of the poor, urban population of Brazil. Under the guise of urban renewal and public health, these programs and processes sought to create an urban space in Rio de Janeiro that pandered to the increasing numbers of European tourists.²³

Favelas

Favelas in Rio de Janeiro were shanty towns, technically illegal, and full of what officials saw as “moral leprosy.”²⁴ Here, poor blacks, browns and whites, struggled on the legal fringe of society in make-shift huts, and dirty, narrow, crowded streets. Cleaning up these areas, morally and physically, was part of a much larger urban planning scheme—and this left little room for popular Afro-Brazilian culture.²⁵ While forms of these shanty towns had existed on the fringes of Rio de Janeiro since the late 18th century, the international focus on urban planning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries unintentionally encouraged the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro to grow. City planners tore down older buildings to make way for modern, European structures, and pushed the 'less desirable' elements of society increasingly toward the cities fringes—into *favelas*. According to Ethnographer Paul Christopher Johnson, this urban planning push “meant

23 Teresa Meade, “Cultural Imperialism in Old Republic Rio de Janeiro: The Urban Renewal and Public Health Project,” in *Science, Medicine and Cultural Imperialism*, ed. Teresa Meade and Mark Walker (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 99-100.

24 Brodwyn Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 16.

25 Fischer, 72-3.

moving Afro-Brazilians, vagrants, and others who would not reflect the Parisian image to less visible sites.”²⁶ Estimates are that 37,000 people lost their residence to this wave of urban planning, and officials made no attempt to relocate those who were suddenly without shelter. Simultaneously, the government outlawed the ever-present temporary dwellings that continue to be a staple of life in the *favelas*. Residence on the fringes subjected the poor to constant peril of eviction or fines.²⁷ Elites further added to this problem by abandoning their old homes and mansions in favor of houses along the beachfront, increasing poverty in the margins, and leaving abandoned buildings and desolate communities in their wake.²⁸

Mental Health and Sanitation

Urban planning projects from the early 1900s paired nicely with the academic and administrative push toward mental health sanitation that came only two decades later. 1,431 miles north in Recife, a systematic repression of Afro-Brazilian religions was emerging, led by some of the nation’s most renowned socio-psychologists. In the 1930s, a movement called the *Serviço de Higiene Mental* (SHM) began systematically targeting spirit possession as a form of mental illness. This group was created by none other than the cousin and friend of Gilberto Freyre, Ulysses Pernambucano. This group's ongoing mission, supported by the city, was to determine which Afro-Brazilian spiritist religious centers were certifiably 'clean,' and thus licensed to practice.

While widespread police persecution of so-called mental cases who participated in rituals

26 Paul Christopher Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 86.

27 Fischer, 35-6.

28 Fischer, 26.

at unclean religious centers was largely confined to Recife, the ideas behind persecution were not.²⁹ Urban planners and academics in Recife had open dialog with their counterparts in Rio de Janeiro, and they were not immune to the intellectual currents that were propelling the initiatives in Recife. Anthropologist Daniel Stone explains that “in confronting the problematic popularity of spiritualism, medical scholars working in Rio de Janeiro stressed that a medium's ability to become possessed reflected an underlying pathology.”³⁰ Moreover, he states that “spiritualism and its associate practices... while dangerous for the mental health of the individual, also have the potential to cause social unrest.”³¹ In short, practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions could be disregarded as insane, discredited as frauds or fined for charlatanry. They were being oppressed for the good of society and the promotion of law and order. These religious practices presented for these public health officials with a mental hygiene problem that the state needed to protect citizens against.

While it is important not to confuse cause and effect, and there is no surrounding data for comparison, it is interesting to note that in the Provincial Presidential Report of 1930 for Rio de Janeiro, the number of mental patients had increased between 1929 and 1930 from 478 to 536, an increase of over 50 people being treated in clinics and asylums.³² While there is no reason to suspect a correlation between this figure and a larger crack-down on religious institutions, it could suggest an increasing interest in mental health issues, which in a climate that promoted spirit-possession as pathology, could quickly turn into religious and racial persecution.

29 Daniel Stone, “Charlatans and Sorcerers: The Mental Hygiene Service in 1930s Recife, Brazil,” in *Sorcery in the Black Atlantic*, ed. Luis Nicolau Parés and Roger Sansi (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 95, 103.

30 Stone, 100.

31 Stone, 104.

32 *Provincial Presidential Report of 1930 for Rio de Janeiro (Rio de Janeiro: 1930)*, 54, <http://brazil.crl.edu/bsd/bsd/u899/000053.html> (accessed November 4, 2012).

Racial Whitening

By 1945, the concept of racial whitening had taken hold in Brazil to the point that Gilberto Freyre could quote a popular Brazilian saying which stated: “Anyone who escapes being an evident Negro is white.”³³ Implicit in this quote are several important concepts about racial ideology that had been developing during the 1920s and 1930s. Firstly, it was in fact possible for the colored population to become white. Secondly, many Brazilians found whitening to be the desired outcome. And thirdly, there is something fundamentally wrong with being a full-blooded black, or even a brown, in Brazil. Mixing became the desired outcome because, as Freyre explains “Portuguese ethnic and cultural complexity seems to have been, from the remote beginning of Brazil, a stimulus to its differentiation from Europe... .”³⁴ Freyre and other sociologists believed that by interbreeding blacks with whites, eventually a whiter, stronger race would emerge.

Prior to 1945, however, there had been serious questions about whether interracial breeding produced positive results. American sociologist Richard Pattee, as mentioned earlier, still discussed interbreeding in terms of the 'primitive.'³⁵ Edward Telles explains that in the 1920s while questions were being raised about the applicability of American or German racial policies, Brazilians “seemed to fear treading out on an uncharted course.”³⁶ It would not be until Freyre and his colleagues encouraged the pursuit of whitening as *the* undisputed ideology that this intellectual current would take hold. While this increased discussion of whitening held hope for

33 Freyre, 97.

34 Freyre, 91.

35 Park, xxxiv.

36 Edward E. Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 32

those who by appearance could pass as white or brown, for those 15 percent who were black,³⁷ the only avenue for racial mobility lay in finding a whiter spouse, in hopes of improving the lives of their offspring.

Paradoxically, as we have seen, it was precisely those 'mixed' Afro-Brazilian religions that came under attack by the authorities. This begs the question of why mixing was considered a positive when applied to race and intermarriage, but a negative when applied to religion. The answer lies, at least in part, with the larger, underlying questions that scholars were asking about what it meant to be a Negro in modern Brazil. Consider the titles of several sociological books from the era: Ramos' *Negro in Brazil*—with chapters on religion, music, and the arts—Raymundo Nina Rodrigues' *Os Africanos no Brasil (Africans in Brazil)*, and Edison Carneiro's *Religiões negras (Black Religions)*, *Os cultos de origem africana no Brasil (The Cults of African Origin in Brazil)*,³⁸ and *The Structure of African Cults in Bahia*³⁹, as well as a host of similarly titled books that followed from 1940-1980. This desire to understand what constituted being 'African' in Brazil led to an over-emphasis on authenticity in everything black, from art and fashion, to religion, and consequently a critique of mixed race and culture. This intellectual current existed parallel to, but often in opposition to, the principles of whitening.

Brazil Penal Code 157

From an analysis of the more abstract methods of persecution, this study now emphasises the concrete persecution under Article 157 of the Brazilian Penal Code of 1890. This code remained in effect until 1940. The article reads as follows:

³⁷Telles, 30.

³⁸ These last three works have not been published in an English edition.

³⁹ Original Portuguese title: *Candomblés da Bahia*.

Art. 157. The practice of spiritism, magic and its sorceries, the use of talismans and cartomancy to arouse sentiments of hate and love, the promise to cure illness, curable and not curable; in sum, to fascinate and subjugate public belief:⁴⁰

Penalty – one to six months in prison and a fine of 100-500 dollars.^{41,42}

Here, we see many aspects of Afro-Brazilian religion come under official attack. Many Afro-Brazilian religions invoke saints to cure ailments, solve lovers' quarrels or bring good luck and fortune. Folklorist Cecília Meireles notes that because many of these rituals were performed outside, or required talismans and offerings to be placed in public locations, great care had to be taken to evade the police.⁴³ As police records show, these attempts at discretion were not always successful.

What is fascinating about article 157 is that it appears to contradict articles 185-188,⁴⁴ which protect the right to freedom of worship from persecution.⁴⁵ In effect, the Penal Code implies is that while religion, not defined as spiritism or magic, enjoys police protection, any practice not defined as a legitimate religion is subject to police persecution.⁴⁶ Given this penal code, the pronouncements of Ramos and other sociologists as to the religious value or magical

40 Translation by: Paul Christopher Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 83.

41 "Codigo Penal Dos Estados Unidos Do Brazil," 1890, article 157, <http://www6.senado.gov.br/legislacao/ListaPublicacoes.action?id=66049> (Accessed November 5, 2012).

42 In Portuguese: Praticar o espiritismo, a magia e seus sortilegios, usar de talismans e cartomancias para despertar sentimentos de odio ou amor, inculcar cura de molestias curaveis ou incuraveis, emfim, para fascinar e subjugar a credulidade publica: Penas – de prisão celular por um a seis mezes e multa de 100\$ a 500\$000.

43 Cecília Meireles, *Batuque, Samba, and Macumba; Drawings of Gestures and Rhythm, 1926-1934* (Rio de Janeiro: FUNARTE, 1983), 76-82.

44 **Art. 185.** Ultrajar qualquer confissão religiosa vilipendiando acto ou objecto de seu culto, desacatando ou profanando os seus symbolos publicamente: Pena – de prisão celular por um a seis mezes. **Art. 186.** Impedir, por qualquer modo, a celebração de ceremonias religiosas, solemnidades e ritos de qualquer confissão religiosa, ou perturbal-a no exercicio de seu culto: Pena – de prisão celular por dous mezes a um anno. **Art. 187.** Usar de ameaças, ou injurias, contra os ministros de qualquer confissão religiosa, no exercicio de suas funcções: Pena – de prisão celular por seis mezes a um anno. **Art. 188.** Sempre que o facto for acompanhado de violencias contra a pessoa, a pena será augmentada de um terço, sem prejuizo da correspondente ao acto de violência praticado, na qual tambem o criminoso incorrerá.

45 "Codigo Penal," articles 185-8.

46 For a more in-depth discussion of this topic, see: Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*.

characteristics of various Afro-Brazilian religions supports Hayes' arguments that sociologists were instrumental in the persecution of these spiritist religions.⁴⁷ Even Meireles, who painted herself as a benign folklorist and artist, repeatedly refers to Afro-Brazilian religions as magical rituals. Like Ramos, she also makes the distinction between Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions, by associating the former with 'good' or white magic, and the latter with 'evil' or black magic.⁴⁸

Another rationale for Article 157 has been put forward by historian Marc Adam Hertzman. In his view, this law, and others like it, served as a form of economic control and “were conceived in part as a response to fears that abolition would plunge the nation into social and economic chaos.”⁴⁹ Afraid that the former slave classes would rise through the economic ranks, Brazilian elites placed restrictions on the ways poor, black Brazilians could make a living. These laws, then, had the task of performing the dual-function of protecting elite society from the supposedly negative traits of Afro-Brazilian religion, while at the same time ensuring the concentration of wealth at the top, away from the *favelas*.

Women in Religion

In looking at the role of the police in manipulating the course of Afro-Brazilian religions in Rio de Janeiro, it is important to examine both the role of women in many of these religions, as well as the way official legal structures affected women in the judicial system. Women take a prodigious role in Afro-Brazilian religious practice. Feminist historian Carole A. Myscofski

47 See my earlier discussion of Afro-Brazilian religious scholarship.

48 Meireles, 64.

49 Marc Adam Hertzman, “A Brazilian Counterweight: Music, Intellectual Property and the African Diaspora in Rio de Janeiro (1910s-1930s),” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 41, no. 4 (November 2009): 707.

explains that “[c]onservative accounts before 1950 placed the ratio of women to men at five to one, and in temples in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, men were only rarely the mediums for possession by the Orixás.”⁵⁰ This is not to say that men did not play a role in Afro-Brazilian religious practice.⁵¹ On the contrary, traditionally only men were allowed to play the drums that serve such a vital role in these religious ceremonies.⁵² Nevertheless, women overwhelmingly outnumber men as priestesses and hosts for the Orixás. Myscowski speculates that the predominant role of women, not seen in the religious traditions of Africa, is a result of the way Brazilians controlled their African slave population; by isolating men and pressuring them to adopt Christianity, women adopted the role of preserving the religious traditions.⁵³

Women and the Legal System

Because women served as the public face of Afro-Brazilian religion, and as the couriers of this tradition, it is important to look at the way the police dealt with women in a judicial context. Throughout this period, cases of deflowering—instances where men had sexual relations with women, promising marriage, and then failing to follow through with that promise—were often brought to the attention of the Rio de Janeiro police force. Somewhat surprisingly, one of the main concerns for the police in Rio de Janeiro in the 1920s and 30s was protecting the honor of the women in their jurisdiction. In many instances, women presented their cases directly to the police, advocating for justice when they felt they had been wronged; a situation exacerbated by

50 Carole A. Myscowski, “Women’s Religious Role in Brazil: A History of Limitations,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 2 (Fall, 1985): 54.

51 For a contemporary look at drumming in Afro-Brazilian religions, see: Melville J. Herskovits, “Drums and Drummers in Afro-Brazilian Cult Life,” *The Musical Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (October, 1944): 477-92.

52 Myscowski, 55.

53 Myscowski, 56.

what has been described as a culture steeped in “a variation of the so-called 'cult of virginity'...”.⁵⁴ Yet, while women may have been the agents in many of these cases, the guardians of these women and the police force were not above taking the law into their own hands. Family members, and even employers, might inform the police if a young woman had disappeared, or if she had run off with someone they did not feel was suitable for her. The police would then begin a search for the woman in question. At other times, the police would take the initiative and remove young women from the company of men they felt might lead the woman into temptation.⁵⁵

These police records show that for women in Rio de Janeiro, securing a marriage partner was an important moment in their life, one that they were willing to fight over if they felt they had been wronged. It is little wonder, then, that these same women might turn toward religion, in addition to, or in lieu of, going to the police with their problems. Yet, as we have seen “the practice of spiritism, magic and its sorceries, the use of talismans and cartomancy to arouse sentiments of hate and love...”⁵⁶ were prohibited under Brazil's Penal Code. Yet, these practices were common, leading scholars and officials alike to question not only the legality of these practices, but their legitimacy as well.⁵⁷

Not all of the police's efforts toward women proved as chivalrous as their work on cases of suspected deflowering. Strict moral codes, particularly during the Vargas era, highlighted the place of the woman in the home. An excellent book on the judicial system in 20th century Rio de

54 Sueann Caulfield and Martha de Abreu Esteves, “50 Years of Virginity in Rio de Janeiro: Sexual Politics and Gender Roles in Juridical and Popular Discourse, 1890-1940,” in “Changing Images of the Brazilian Woman: Studies of Female Sexuality in Literature, Mass Media, and Criminal Trials, 1884-1992,” special issue, *Luso-Brazilian Review* 30, no. 1 (Summer, 1993): 61.

55 Marcos Luiz Bretas, “The Sovereign's Vigilant Eye? Daily Policing and Women in Rio de Janeiro, 1907-1930,” *Crime, History and Societies* 2, no. 2 (August, 1998): 59-60.

56 “Codigo Penal,” article 157.

57 Hayes, 286.

Janeiro describes the ideal female role:

Labor Minister Marcondes Filho highlighted the carefully delineated role of women in creating this idealized family, emphasizing the need to 'protect' the *operaria* from any function that might interfere with her natural role as 'the devoted companion of the worker, the *senhora* of the proletarian home,' and stressing her auxiliary function in the masculine world of work and politics.⁵⁸

This narrow view of the role of women was most certainly at odds with the active role that women played in Afro-Brazilian religions.

It was also at odds with Afro-Brazilian celebrations like *carnival*. Several authors provide examples of women who participated in *carnival*, and either lost police protection, or personal agency. In one instance, a woman was denied redress in a defloweration case because she stayed out late and “dressed in carnival costumes.”⁵⁹ In a second case, a mother, particularly worried because her daughter met and ran off with a man she met at *carnival*, called in the police. The police then forced their way into the room in which the two young people were staying. These are but some of the many stories that have been discovered centering on the *carnival* festivities.⁶⁰ Perhaps some of this fascination with *carnival* is that it upended the social order. As Meireles notes, at *carnival*, “everyone has gotten dressed up to 'have fun.' A poor person symbolically turns into a nobleman because he cannot or will not give up the chance for a moment of social compensation provided by Carnaval [sic].”⁶¹ Whatever the cause, this fear of women and *carnival* continued even after Vargas popularized the festivals for international tourism, including the dressing up of women in *carnival* dresses as an integral part of the festivities. This situation created a double-standard within which these women were required to navigate—the

58 Fischer, 96-7.

59 Caulfield and Abreu Esteves, 50.

60 Bretas, 59.

61 Meireles, 12.

officially sanctioned enjoyment of the festivals on the one hand, and the dangers of being seen as a vagrant or immoral woman on the other.⁶²

In addition to sexual deviance, Afro-Brazilian women in particular were subject to vagrancy laws, designed to control the morality of the black population in Rio de Janeiro.⁶³ Often seen by *favela* residents as examples of police brutality and harassment, charges of vagrancy were vigorously prosecuted in the courts of Rio de Janeiro.⁶⁴ These laws often targeted women for drunkenness and disorderly conduct⁶⁵—two things that could be tied to the practice of Afro-Brazilian religions.⁶⁶ At many Afro-Brazilian rituals, a sugar cane brandy was imbibed, both by the participants, but also by initiates who had been possessed by an Orixá's spirit.⁶⁷ In addition to being a sign of vagrancy and Afro-Brazilian religious practice, alcoholism was also a sign of mental illness, and thus could be combated on several legal fronts.⁶⁸ No matter how the police chose to initiate their persecution, vagrancy laws served as part of a larger attempt at controlling what officials saw as the moral depravity present in *favelas* and supposedly inherent in Afro-Brazilian religious tradition.

Self-Degradation and Posturing

Not only were official and academic institutions categorizing, legislating and policing Afro-Brazilian religious practice, but many Afro-Brazilians themselves began latching onto these ideas. In many instances, this served as a way to promote their own version of Afro-Brazilian

62 Hertzman, 706.

63 Fischer, 101.

64 Fischer, 107-8.

65 Bretas, 67.

66 Many of the Orixás were fond of excessive drinking or cigar smoking, and wild, uncontrolled dancing.

67 Meireles, 72.

68 *Provincial Presidential Report of 1930*, 54.

religious practice, in hopes of gaining official 'religion' status. In other cases it acted as a means for individuals to distance themselves or their group from practices that the official establishment had already judged illegitimate. Hertzman paraphrases the response of a 1930s black musician, Tio Faustino who stated that “Candomblé... was a pure religious form that had been 'adulterated' by individuals in Rio, who diluted it with European sensibilities and created macumba [sic].”⁶⁹ Here, Faustino not only echoes the establishment, but by making these claims, clearly sets himself apart from the practice of Macumba, and creates a context in which he becomes a legitimate actor. Faustino had been attempting to patent several 'African' instruments, and was keen to represent himself, and his case, on the side of the 'good' Afro-Brazilians and the 'acceptable' religions.⁷⁰

This legal posturing was not limited to individuals, but extended to religious institutions themselves. For the same reason that Faustino attempted to distance himself from the practice of Macumba, many religious centers desired to distance themselves from centers and individuals who might put a negative, spiritualist mark on their organization. This practice benefited the centers by increasing their popularity, and disassociating them from those centers who engaged in activities that could be legally prosecuted under Article 157 of the Penal Code. Stone explains in his notes that “[b]y the 1920s 'low spiritualism' had become the more common expression, appearing frequently in police reports to describe objects and practices that were deemed to be criminal.”⁷¹ To avoid this label, religious leaders had to scramble to determine which rituals could be retained, and which proved too legally dangerous to continue.

69 Hertzman, 705.

70 Hertzman, 703-5.

71 Stone, 116.

CONCLUSION

What this paper has attempted to show is that the police and public policy in Rio de Janeiro, the government of Brazil, and the intellectual currents combined in the 1920s and 1930s to produce a climate that favored some Afro-Brazilian religions and practices, while suppressing and persecuting others. Many of these forces had nothing in common, and on the surface, have nothing to do with race or religion. Yet, combined together, they created a future in which Bramly could refer to Macumba in 1977 as “a corrupted version of African animism: a naive, chaotic hotchpotch of superstitions and beliefs... .”⁷² Scholars have discussed all of these forces individually, and at great length, but to my knowledge, none have attempted to show the intentional and unintentional collusion between the academy, the state and social forces, or the threat that they posed to Afro-Brazilian religious practice.

Academic currents on race explained that the population should be whitened, while simultaneously attempting to define the authentic 'African,' and consequently, the authentic African religion. This intellectual thrust coincided with new ideas about social hygiene, the result of which pushed many black, Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners to the outer limits of society—at the same time attaching a mental health stigma to many aspects of these religious rituals. Laws against spiritism—religious rituals priestesses hoped would lessen the burdens on the lives of the poor—prevented these people from seeking solace in their religions. Local laws and governmental decrees on the role of women in society limited the ability of the spiritual leaders and their followers—most of them women—to practice their beliefs. Finally, recognition of these restrictions by black Brazilians and the leaders of Afro-Brazilian religions created a culture of infighting, where individuals and groups claimed legitimacy at the price of another's

⁷² Bramly, 3.

illegitimacy. Taken by themselves, none of these factors could have produced the widespread suppression of Afro-Brazilian religion. Yet combined, they proved to be a force too powerful to overcome. In the end, Candomblé won the early battles for legitimacy, but decades of persistence and recent positive scholastic publicity assure that the other Afro-Brazilian religions, like Macumba and Umbanda, will maintain their traditions into the future.

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