

PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

In the Western imaginary, Brazil embodies the myth of a wild and enchanted land, inhabited by hospitable people who are at one with nature. Salvador has long been a city in which contrasts are diminished, colors combine, and beliefs intertwine. But Bahia is also the “Rome of Africa,” a place in which religious traditions brought by slaves have been preserved and transmitted most faithfully. Bahia—with its *Nagô* Candomblé, which concentrates an ideal of Africanity—has become the promised land in which racial mixing and harmony reign, although the dream of African purity lives on in the quest for roots which animates conversations in the most traditional houses of worship.

In this work, it is another Brazil that I want to look at, a Brazil with thousands of exceptions to the rules—whether the rule be a law or a model to be respected—making the establishment of orthodoxy or a standard line impossible in the thousands of Candomblé centers spread throughout the country. Multiplicity dominates and is imposed, weakening the elegant—and, at times, too perfect—systematizations that attempt to crystallize the religion.

Writing about Candomblé is certainly a dangerous undertaking, with many pitfalls. Too many illustrious predecessors and too many works presented only one of this religious phenomenon’s many forms. For a long time, there was even a feeling that nothing new could be said about this field, perhaps one of the most explored in religious anthropology.

Beatriz G. Dantas’s pioneering work, which took Brazilian scholarship by storm, brought crucial criticism of the very idea

of “Nagô purity.” Many other authors followed her example, analyzing the scholars’ role in the making of traditions. A decade has passed since I published the first edition of this book in French, in 1999. The Brazilian edition followed in 2004. Today’s American edition gives me the opportunity to clarify my personal approach to this issue.

While Dantas (1988)—like most authors who criticized the valorization of the Nagô model—attributes the imposition of a model of purity to the conscious action of intellectuals, in order to better “control” the cults, my aim in this work is to underline the agency of the Candomblé elites connected to the three houses of worship considered traditional in Bahia. As we shall see, these Candomblé leaders succeeded in imposing their own vision of the tradition upon the intellectuals, reshaping Afro-Brazilian religious practice in their own interest. This work addresses the issue in a way which is fundamentally different from Dantas’s argument.

Dantas analyzed the past: the 1930s, a key period in the construction of national identity and in the creation of Afro-Brazilian studies. I decided to write not only of the past, but also of the present, highlighting the ritual negotiation which represents the core of religious life in Candomblé houses. The confrontation between an ideal model of tradition and the reality of ritual practice shows the agency of the initiates and their power of negotiation even at the very heart of ritual hierarchy. The “invention of tradition,” then, is the product of a dual movement, a dual project linking religious elites with intellectual elites in the same quest for an ideal Africanity. Today, Afro-Brazilian religions cannot be considered merely as expressions of “Black Brazil,” as some authors suggest, because they crossed the color line a long time ago, gathering white, black, and mestizo followers. It is not useful to make racial divisions when discussing the Afro-Brazilian religious universe: in Brazil, race and culture are dissociated, and one can be initiated in a “black” religion without being or considering oneself black.

My analysis of ritual practice shows the impossibility of seeking “uncorrupted” African origins in Candomblé. Nevertheless, young researchers are still too often oriented to reproduce the type of analysis in which Nagô Candomblé is taken as the embodiment of African tradition in Brazil. I hope that this study will help give a better understanding of a very complex universe, showing how tradition, which sees itself as eternal and immutable, is in fact reinvented day after day.