

Spiritualism, African Deities, and Sacred Plants

Brazilian Religiosity and Multifaceted Syncretism

By

Giovanna Campani and Claudia Herzfeld

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The book fits into our life path and our deep and loving relationship with Brazil; the birthplace for one of us, the place chosen for anthropological research for the other. Our dedications must take into account this difference.

I am infinitely grateful to have been born in Brazil, a country of vast natural beauty and welcoming people and that gave me the answers to the questions of mediumship and spirituality that I have sought throughout my life, answers that I did not find during the years I lived in France, the USA and Canada.

I would like to thank my beloved family, to whom I dedicate this book: to my sons Claudio Roberto Herzfeld de Castro, his wife Adriaene Alencastro Herzfeld, and Carlos Roberto Herzfeld de Castro and his wife Gloria Roberta Menezes Herzfeld. I dedicate this book to future generations, to my beloved grandchildren Daniel Moura Menezes Herzfeld, Nicolas Moura Menezes Herzfeld and Benicio Alencastro Herzfeld.

Claudia Herzfeld

"Then I landed in Rio, and it was one of the most impressive experiences I have ever had. I was fascinated and at the same time shocked. Here, in fact, I would find not only one of the most magnificent landscapes in the world, a unique combination of sea and land, city and tropical nature, but also a form of civilization that is absolutely new." Stefan Zweig, author of *Brazil, Land of the Future*. No one better described the traveler's encounter with the city of Rio. I would add that, in my case, after almost four years in Rio, I continue to be amazed by the lights, the colors, the orchids hanging from the trees, the urban views.

I dedicate the book to my sons, Ernesto and Elias who accompanied me and supported me during my stay in Brazil, to my daughter Corinne, who follows her path, and my little granddaughter Arirose.

Giovanna Campani

Preface

Prof. Vincenzo Pace, University of Padua, Italy

Around the world, one can find open-air social laboratories, where the resilience of traditional beliefs is a testament to the enduring cultural identity of peoples. Despite past histories of winners and losers, marked by the triumphs of one over the other, with the terrible baggage of persecutions, executions, and cancellations, often unsuccessful to the end, these beliefs persist. Worshiping respective divinities is a powerful affirmation and transmission of cultural identity, providing a sense of continuity and stability in a rapidly changing world.

Some of these socio-religious laboratories continue to produce new beliefs and spiritual practices, sometimes taking shape in churches, other times remaining at the stage of fluid movements, which are essentially evolving and adaptable belief systems. In others, modern forms of belief are being experimented with, that are refractory to the idea that there could be watchful “customs officers” of the sacred called to guard the symbolic borders of true and false belief. Even where the supreme controllers of the doctrines of the true faith were enthroned, this did not prevent the resistance of the old gods to the new God, who was presented as the sole and exclusive divinity to the peoples colonized and evangelized first by the Catholic Church and then by the other Churches of the Reformation. So much so that not only did they never actually leave the scene, but they continued in other forms and traces to speak with human beings, who kept in the arcane of their memory the codes to interpret their words, even if they found themselves in conditions of physical and moral slavery or were forcibly induced to convert to the words of the new God.

When one has the opportunity to enter these laboratories, scattered throughout the contemporary world, the first impression one gets is a feeling of bewilderment. Definitions, categories, and classifications typical of European culture, sedimented over time and used since the dawn of young social disciplines such as anthropology or the sociology of religions, appear inadequate. Accustomed to considering, in the long breath of the history of Eurocentrism, polytheisms, animisms, sorcerers and shamans as expressions of credulity without any rational foundation, a legacy of an archaic world, we no longer find our way when we discover that the laboratories mentioned above are actively functioning in modern and, in some cases, supermodern societies.

Marc Augé¹, when he wrote *Génie du Paganisme* in 1982, reflecting on what he had observed during his long study stay in some West African countries, tells us how he gradually changed his view of a reality other than his original one; of a society like the French one in which religion was considered a private matter and where the first great school of anthropology had been pervaded by the sacred fire of the civilizing and saving mission of primitive African cultures and Indian peoples². Augé intuited, more than forty years ago, that speaking of gods, sorcerers, and shamans was not a prerogative only of backward societies, not yet enlightened by modern rationality. He demonstrated how, through these figures of the sacred, human beings have always spoken of the relationship between spirit and body, of the combination of religious practices and pragmatic beneficial effects on daily life, of the relationship, finally, between the biological dimension and the social sphere.

¹ M. Augé, *Génie du paganisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982 (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1982).

² See R. Guolo, *I ferventi*, Milano, Meltemi, 2021; Michel Leiris *etnologo*, Meltemi, 2022 e *Una missione civilizzatrice: Marcel Griaule, l'Etiopia e l'Italia fascista*, Milano, Meltemi, 2023.

Religions are means of communication, powerful or weak depending on the case. They tend to define the symbolic boundaries within which human beings can learn to treat their bodies (health-salvation), the biological cycle of birth-death, and the rules of good and evil. The genius of paganism, said Augé, is found precisely in this last aspect: morality is not a doctrine defined once and for all, it is an experience of life. What is good must be lived, as something simultaneously good for the mind, the spirit, and the body. Only in this way can we understand why different gods can communicate with other; metaphorically speaking, it can be easier for believers to turn, when necessary, to a plurality of forces or spirits than to resolve an emotional dilemma or physical suffering.

One of the most interesting laboratories, which is, in many respects, different and distant, but at the same time not so alien to our way of feeling the religious and the sacred, is represented by Brazil. Colonized by Europeans and evangelized by the Catholic Church, it has become, from a historical and socio-demographic point of view, a Catholic country, where old and new gods speak to each other and continue to interact without too many conflicts with a wide variety of individuals. These combine, without hesitation or doubts of any kind the good practice (from their point of view) of crossing the symbolic borders that the Catholic religion has tried, all in all in vain over at least three centuries, to trace in order to distinguish itself from other pre-existing belief systems of Indigenous peoples, from those who resisted in the slave trade from Africa and, finally, from others who have successfully grafted themselves, such as Kardecist spiritualism which quickly adapted to the Brazilian mentality and culture.

A visitor arriving in Brazil may be impressed, whether in large metropolises or medium-sized cities with urban growth, by the quantity of signs that indicate the presence of some church or spiritual center, next to more familiar places of worship such as a Catholic church or one

belonging to the family of Protestant Reformation Churches. I have heard colleagues visiting Brazil for the first time exclaim: “So many religions, there are too many; how is it possible that each one has so many followers that it can justify its reason for being?” The question is poorly posed, since the abundance of religious offerings for a person born and raised in Brazil is not that disturbing. You can be born Catholic or Protestant or in another religious denomination, but, if need be, by individual choice, you can frequent a *terreiro* of Candomblé or Umbanda, go from time to time to a spiritualist church to consult a medium and get closer, perhaps without continuity, to a community whose spiritual guide guarantees you the journey into the world of the dead and spirits through the achievement of an altered state of consciousness with the intake of a psychedelic substance and so on.

The symbolic boundaries between the various belief systems are easily crossed, despite the anathemas of the past of the historic churches or the more recent invectives by the new mega-churches of Pentecostal inspiration. Religious mobility reflects a low-intensity feeling of belonging to the historic churches. So much so that a school of anthropological and sociological thought, which has been consolidating over the last twenty years, prefers not to speak of syncretism or religious bricolage anymore. Instead, it uses a notion borrowed from animal ethology. It resembles the formula of religion à la carte. However, it seems a useful metaphor that adds some more elements to grasp an aspect of modern belief, which is simultaneously the *basso continuo* of the history of a great country like Brazil.

The metaphorical concept is that of *butinage*³ and refers both to the worker ants that incessantly go to gather food and (and this is the most appropriate figure to define it) to the worker bees that fly from

³ E. Soares, *Le butinage religieux*, Genève, Institut Universitaire d’Étude, 2009 e Y. N. Gez, Y. Droz, J. Rey, E. Soares, *The Art of Religious Mobility*, Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2021.

one flower to another to gather nectar. Nectar was the drink that gave eternal life. Therefore, the metaphor tells us about an exchange. The bees flock where they feel they can find a sugary liquid, also attracted by a particular substance that stimulates pollination: in this way, the flowers reproduce, and the insects will, in turn, be able to produce honey. In search of a mutually fruitful exchange for the insect and the flower, the former moves in a space that offers a variety of possibilities, attracted by the color, the smell, and the shape of the latter, in a process of communicating information that is transformed into vital energy for both. Outside of metaphor, in a society dominated by a religion that operates under a monopoly, the space for mobility is reduced, even if other gods manage to speak, despite the censures and execrations of the guardians of the one true and absolute God⁴. Usually, they do so through that complex system of signs and devotional practices classified under popular religiosity conventionally in the social and historical sciences. The connection between the historical figure of a Catholic saint, such as Anthony of Lisbon (later to become Anthony of Padua), preacher and reformer of the Franciscan Order of the thirteenth century and the much better known figure in Catholicism as a great miracle-worker constitutes an exemplary case among the many that can be remembered. Where the first Portuguese colonization reached the four corners of the world, bringing with it the cult of the saint of Lisbon, Anthony's fortune knew no setbacks and, above all, his cult managed to last over time, because, from time to time, he showed himself to be a welcoming spirit capable of coexisting with other pre-existing spirits, which the Catholic Church had tried in vain to expel from the sacred imagination of the local populations, until today.

The metaphorical concept is that of *butinage* and refers both to the worker. The popularity of this saint speaks to the Sinhalese and Tamil

⁴ J. Assmann, *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt*, Wien, Picus Verlag, 2006.

immigrants from the island of Dharma (Sri Lanka) in Italy, where, at the beginning of May, they flock to Padua to venerate the tomb of the miracle-working saint. Whether they are Catholic or Buddhist, Hindu or Christian, it matters little to them. Brazil, after all, will be the new homeland of the saint. The history of modern Brazil itself is intertwined with that of the small kingdom of Portugal, which in a few centuries managed to build an empire between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. If in Afro-Brazilian cults Anthony is the Catholic mask of a potent mediator between the divine and the human, this function is expressed in popular devotion in the figure of the *casamenteiro* saint, literally the one who “arranges marriages”. This image of the saint has then spread outside Brazil, reinforcing the other belief in the saint who helps find lost things. With a very Brazilian difference: the saint can be “mistreated” until he requests grace from those who invoke his intercession. Two Brazilian anthropologists⁵ have listed the various tortures to which the image of the saint is subjected if grace is slow in arriving. It can be immersed in boiling water or even in a national dish such as black bean soup, which is never missing even in the height of summer, or buried, often upside down, turning the holy card upside down, in memory of an ancient Portuguese maritime practice in which they used to display the figure of the saint with his head down when a storm broke out at sea. The image returned to its correct position only when the waves calmed down and navigation could resume peacefully.

Communicating is ultimately the task humans attribute to what we call religions. Hence the central function of both the mediators, believed to be able to put the visible in communication with the invisible, and of the recurring action of “making sacrifices” not only to open a channel of exchange not only “upwards”, but also horizontally, as if

⁵ M. Pereira Dos Santos, M. Pereira Dos Santos Zanini, *Santo Antonio do Brasil e o susto italiano*, in “Revista Caminhos da Historia”, 2015, 29/2, pp. 9-23.

to communicate with the gods it was necessary to demonstrate one's ability to be with others, of solidarity, as Durkheim would have said.

Brazil is an example of a society with high religious diversity and mobility. Not today, but since the fall of colonial rule, all its gods could freely speak again. Even neo-Pentecostal churches, which were born in the late 1970s and have multiplied everywhere in the federal states. The type of rituals also explains their relative success (which has reached the point of saturation⁶); they propose exorcism from evil spirits, healing, prophecies, exchange of faith/economic well-being, and so on. In words, the pastors of these churches openly condemn Candomblé and Umbanda, but, on closer inspection, they take up liturgical styles and models of mediation between the visible and invisible that are, in some respects, typical of Afro-Brazilian cults.

Entering and visiting the Brazil laboratory is, at the same time, a way to gain insight into the profound religious stratification of a country that is still formally Catholic in the majority. It can be observed how many layers the cliff of religions is made up of, in the largest subcontinent of Latin America, and how the porosity of the materials that make up the cliff favors a discreet, almost spontaneous, interaction between the layers themselves. The socio-religious history of Brazil is, in many respects, different from that of other Latin American nations. Argentina or Uruguay are not comparable to what has happened and is happening in neighboring Brazil. If anything, the latter appears closer to large African countries, such as Nigeria or the Republic of South Africa, or, moving towards Asia, like South Korea or Indonesia, where a new generation of Christianity is advancing by recovering deep layers of the religions of the spirits⁷. Therefore, observing the multifaceted Brazilian religious world means getting

⁶ M. Lamport (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, Lonham (Maryland), Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.

⁷ E. Pace, *Cristianesimo extra-large*, Bologna, EDB, 2018.

an idea of the vitality of the sacred in all its manifestations: from the domesticated one of the Christian churches to the wild one of the new charismatic churches, from the magical-sacral of Afro-American cults to the mystical sacred of spiritualist mediums, from the light sacred cloak of the New Age movements to the heavier one of the communities, where the experience of trance is achieved with the help of psychedelic substances.

Giovanna Campani and Claudia Herzfeld's book is a well-documented and illustrated journey in the many faces of Brazilian religiosity; an ethnographic journey that intrigues the reader and leads them by the hand from one place to another, where one can encounter the different actors of practices that we would too hastily consider forms of superstition. A learned and, at the same time, friendly guide, thanks to the language, the authors deliberately avoid making it difficult to access for those not in the field. Anthropology and ethnography often allow this operation, since the starting point, the basic methodology, is observation as detached as possible. In truth, it can never be so to the end, because the studied phenomena do not leave one indifferent, they speak on an emotional level, not just on a cognitive one.

Whoever relies on the guidance of the two authors easily comes to understand the peculiarity of a society, like the Brazilian one, from a religious point of view, its vital inimitable overlapping of beliefs and practices that, like a great river that draws from multiple sources upstream, diversify downstream into many more or less organized forms (churches, sects, movements, cults, mystical networks, magic circles and so on), with borders that are all in all relatively porous. In this sense, Brazil has shown for some time how one can believe in the relative without letting religious differences slide down the inclined plane of intolerance and conflict. Only when the *Bancada Evangelica* was formed – the electoral cartel of pastors of some neo-Pentecostal churches, who, once elected, acted as an influential political-religious

lobby – did religious conflict appear on the public scene. An anomaly in the history of this country is a cognitive dissonance that offends the tolerant and festive feeling of the religious experience of the great majority of Brazilians.

Introduction

America Mestiza

Will the world “be métis or not be at all,” “le métissage est l’avenir de l’homme”⁸ as the Franco-Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor (1950) claimed nearly seventy years ago? Alternatively, as the Colombian intellectual William Ospina writes in his book *America Mestiza*, whose subtitle is “*The Country of the Future*”: “*The world is not moving toward pure races and cultures, but toward mestizajes.*” However, forming a *mestizo* world presupposes “*great misunderstandings, difficulties of identification, rejections, and repulsions*”. Therefore, Ospina continues, “*the example of Mestizo America, which has been learning this difficult integration for five centuries, will be indispensable and invaluable for all peoples.*” (Ospina, 2013: 254)

Latin America, defined by its diversity and the blending of Iberian and Indigenous cultural heritages, further enriched by the multiple convergence of African elements, contributions from other European nations, and the growing integration of traditions from the rest of the world, can serve as an example: “*The ethnic and cultural complexity that*

⁸ We encountered some challenges in translating the term *metissage* (in French), *mestizaje* (in Spanish) and *mestiçagem* (in Portuguese) into English, a term that encompasses both the biological and cultural dimensions. The term has been loosely translated into English as “miscegenation” or “cross-breeding” originally referred to racial mixing (Dickason 1985, p.21). Historically, particularly in the context of colonialism, Europeans viewed *métissage* as a detrimental biological process that weakened gene pools and “mongrelized” the human race, with a strong desire for the preservation of racial purity. However, there has been a significant shift in recent times, with *metissage* now used to signify cultural blending or the hybridization of identities resulting from colonialism and transcultural influences. *Metissage* can be translated as the mixing of cultures, transculturation, creolization. In some English texts, *metissage* or *mestizaje* are sometimes left in the original language. Hereinafter, we will use the Portuguese term, *mestiçagem*.

has so far been one of our greatest difficulties will gradually become one of our greatest virtues." (Ospina, 2013: 254)

In 1940, years before Senghor and Ospina, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, exiled from a Europe dominated by the ideology of white and Aryan racial superiority, had identified Brazil as "the country of the future," a place of peaceful racial blending:

"In this gigantic melting pot, whites, Indigenous peoples, Black people, Portuguese, Germans, Italians, Slavs, Japanese, Christians and Jews, Buddhists and pagans have been mixing for ages without any distinction or the slightest conflict. (...) With complete naturalness, this mixing of race and color has been going on for decades, for centuries." (Zweig, 2013: 71)

Nowadays, Ospina, captivated by the enormous Brazilian melting pot, uses similar words: *"It is possible to witness the noble spectacle of different races looking at each other as equals, loving freely, and blending without emphasis."* (Ospina, 2013: 254)

Mestiçagem (the Portuguese term we will use in the text) is a central concept in discussions about race and identity in Brazil. However, Ospina's optimistic view is not universally shared. The debate over *mestiçagem*, as an ideological artifice, was spearheaded by Brazilian Black intellectuals and synthesized in works, among others, *O genocídio do negro brasileiro* (1978) by Abdias do Nascimento, *Lugar de negro* (1982) by Lélia Gonzalez, *As injustiças de Clío* (1990) by Clóvis Moura, and *Rediscutindo a mestiçagem no Brasil* (1999) by Kabengele Munanga. *Mestiçagem* is considered an ideological construct whose function is to defend a principle of social organization of races and ethnicities, masking violence within the relationships between whites, Black people, and Indigenous peoples.

For or against *mestiçagem*? A pernicious dialectic is today imposed on the conceptual frames used to describe the multiple hybridizations—

in phenotypic, cultural, and religious contexts—that have occurred, in Brazil. In order to move beyond this dialectic, it is important to remind that *mestiçagem* is, first of all, an historical concept that has been used by intellectuals and historians to explain the country's formation as a state and nation in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Merlo (2023) insists on the epistemic nature of *mestiçagem*, “that is, as a category of thought used to explain a phenomenon within the order of hybrid phenomena” (Merlo, 2023: 103). Let us briefly recall that in 1844, the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute (Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro, IHGB) organized a writing contest with the following task: “How should the history of Brazil be written?” The winning thesis was by the German naturalist Carl Von Martius, who characterized Brazil by its unique blend of the three races: white, Black, and Indigenous. “It should be a central point for the reflective historian to show how, in the successive development of Brazil, the conditions for the improvement of the three human races placed side by side in this country—unlike anything known in ancient history—are established, and how they should serve one another as both means and ends.” (Von Martius, 1991: 34)

This is why we decided to start defining *mestiçagem* as etymologically and semantically based on its cultural specificities and differences from other categories that designate the phenomenon of hybridity, such as miscegenation, hybridization, and syncretism.

The biological *mestiçagem* among the three races, at the origin of the Brazilian people, is parallel to an original cultural hybridization and a remarkable religious syncretism, evident in the porous symbolic boundaries between various belief systems: Catholicism, African religions, 19th-century Spiritualism, and shamanism.

Studying Brazilian syncretism is a deep dive into the profound religious stratification of a country that still formally maintains a Catholic majority. It allows us to observe the many layers that make up the cliff

of religions in the largest subcontinent of Latin America and how the porosity of the materials forming this cliff encourages a subtle, almost spontaneous interaction between the layers themselves. This depth of study reveals the richness and complexity of Brazilian religious culture.

***Mestiçagem* and Miscegenation: From Biology to Culture**

The term *mestizaje* (in Spanish), *mestiçagem* (in Portuguese), *métissage* in French —from the Latin *mixtus*— derives from the word *mestiço* (Portuguese), *mestizo* (Spanish), *métis* (French). The Portuguese word *mestiço* is very old, “dating back to the 15th century, when it referred to animals and plants resulting from two different species or varieties” (Merlo, 2023: 103).

The use of the word *mestizo* dates back to the early colonial period. For instance, the writer Inca Garcilaso de la Vega declared himself *mestizo* in his “*Comentarios Reales de los Incas*”, published in Lisbon in 1609. This term also appears in the “*Diccionario de autoridades*” (1726-1739)⁹. “However, the word *mestizaje* did not appear in the dictionaries of the Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española) until the 1925 edition, although it was undoubtedly in use earlier (...). Thus, the theory that the term *mestizaje* was in use from the very beginning of colonization is probably incorrect” (Kubiak, 2014: 147).

Further, the term *mestiçagem* holds significant weight within the field of biology, as it denotes the production of phenotypes, that is, physical and chromatic phenomena. As a factor of human genetics, *mestiçagem* takes place when different human groups come into

⁹ Between 1726 and 1739, the Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española) published its first lexicographical repertoire, the “Dictionary of the Castilian language, in which the true meaning of words, their nature and quality, with phrases or ways of speaking, proverbs or sayings, and other things appropriate to the use of the language” are explained, known as *Diccionario de autoridades*. Available at: <https://apps2.rae.es/DA.html>

contact, whether in conditions of peace or war. There is, however, a difference between *mestiçagem* and miscegenation. While miscegenation covers only the biological or genetic aspect of ethnic mixtures, *mestiçagem* encompasses a broader significance, including the cultural and social aspects of these mixtures. The French historian Serge Gruzinski expresses this process as follows: *"We will use the term 'mestizaje' to designate the mixtures that took place on American soil in the 16th century among human beings, worldviews, and ways of life originating from four continents: America, Europe, Africa, and Asia."* (Gruzinski 2001: 62)

From the beginning of colonization, the worldviews and imaginaries that came together in this blending process were largely religious. The Iberian Peninsula featured political and social systems centered on religion. Culture was inseparable from religion.

The Spanish and Portuguese colonial systems proposed evangelization as a means of domination, which simultaneously offered a salvation promise. Through catechesis, the Catholic religion was introduced to Indigenous populations and enslaved Africans. The latter arrived from Africa, already imbued with their religious principles and values, but were forced to live according to the customs and beliefs of their colonizers.

Despite their subjugated condition, Black people managed to preserve some aspects of their faith. The contamination of the European religious framework, by traits of Indigenous and Black spirituality, represents a unique form of *mestiçagem*: religious syncretism. Without delving into the intricacies of the conceptual discussion surrounding syncretism, we reaffirm the validity of the concept to be applied to the merging of Catholic, African, Indigenous, spiritualist, Eastern, etc. beliefs and rites in the Brazilian context that we will present in the book. According to Droogers: *"One may call Brazil a laboratory for religious studies, as almost all of the world's religions are represented in the country"* (Droogers, 2006: 32).

***Mestiçagem* and Religious Syncretism**

What are the differences between *mestiçagem* and syncretism? While *mestiçagem*, as we have seen, originates in biology, as a factor of human genetics, syncretism features a process of cultural interaction, that is, the amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought. Religious syncretism is the blending of beliefs and practices from diverse religious traditions. When different religious communities come into contact, their beliefs and practices often intertwine, leading to the emergence of new and intriguing religious expressions.

Furthermore, according to some authors, it represents an attempt to reduce cultural and religious conflicts through the mixing process (Valente, 1976: 10). The term *syncretism* derives from the Greek *synkretismos*, which refers to the Cretan practice of allying against a common enemy, despite internal differences. Latin America is undoubtedly one of the places on the planet where religious syncretism—between Christianity and Indigenous or African religions—is most visible. However, the phenomenon is ancient.

Syncretism started in the ancient world, by blending Greco-Egyptian religious beliefs during the Hellenistic period. Syncretism profoundly influenced the Roman pantheon, shaping the religious landscape of the empire, by blending Roman deities with those of conquered peoples. This fusion of beliefs was not only a reflection of Rome's vast and diverse empire but also a strategic move to incorporate and pacify newly acquired territories. For instance, the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis became widely venerated in Rome, symbolizing the amalgamation of Greco-Roman and Egyptian religious practices.

Centuries later, the spread of Christianity in Europe incorporated pagan rituals and festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, which were assimilated into Christian celebrations. Christianity is a blend of Judaism, paganism, and various cultural activities that are now locally included

and that depend on the location of the Christian believers. Any time more than one religious or spiritual tradition encounters another, there is likely to be sharing and the rubbing off of one on the other.

However, the encounter between two cultures and religions rarely sees them on an equal footing: the syncretic issue is thus intertwined with the theme of dominance and power. Syncretism often occurs in social conditions characterized by unequal power relations (Stewart et al., 1994).

According to Soares (2002), when two traditions are brought into contact, the dominant tradition provides the system of meaning, selecting and ordering the values of the other. However, the author emphasizes, while the values of the dominated tradition are not entirely lost, but acquire new meanings, some elements of the dominant tradition undergo a contamination process. Overall, syncretism is a reinterpretation of the original signifiers, enriched with new ones, aiming not to lose them (Soares, 2002).

According to Valente (1976), syncretism, fundamentally characterized by a mixture of cultural elements, may, in some cases, produce an intimate interfusion, a true symbiosis between the components of the cultures that come into contact. Valente thus emphasizes the symbiotic aspect that gives rise to a new cultural identity, in which the characteristics of the cultures of origin are associated and combined to varying degrees.

For the Brazilian anthropologist Reginaldo Prandi (2009), in the case of Brazil, the Black population preserved some elements of their faith, bringing their gods, the Orixás, closer to Catholic saints. Catholicism thus ended up coexisting with Candomblé, with a recreation of the meanings of religious practices: *“Candomblé was formed and transformed in the Catholic social and cultural context of 19th-century Brazil. Through syncretism, the Orixás began to be identified with the saints, so they were*

venerated both in the churches and the terreiros¹⁰, a term that literally means “courtyards,” gathering places where Afro-Brazilian religious practices were performed. Even the followers of the Orixás in Brazil, especially in the early days, were Catholics, and many rituals celebrated in the terreiro were complemented by ceremonies attended in church” (Prandi, 2009: 50).

Syncretism has meant the failure of the initial catechetical project carried out by the dominant Portuguese power. According to the literary critic Silviano Santiago (1978), the main objective of the catechesis in Brazil was to avoid both bilingualism and religious diversity, that is, any trace of other cultures in the European cultural system. It was, therefore, thanks to the resistance of the Indigenous and Black populations that syncretism occurred against Portuguese will, preventing the total loss of their cultures.

Silviano Santiago considers the loss of the “purity” of European culture to be the most significant contribution of Latin Americans to Western culture and states that the existence of a Latin American people occurs through the deviation of European culture because, without cultural *mestizagem*, there would only be a copy of Europe: *“In the algebra of the conqueror, unity is the only measure that matters. One God, one King, one Language: the true King, the true Language. The colonialist rebirth, in turn, generates a new society, that of the mestizos. The greatest contribution of Latin America to Western culture comes from the systematic destruction of the concepts of unity and purity. Latin America established its place on the map of Western civilization, thanks to the movement of deviation from the norm, acting as the destroyer, which transfigures the defined and immutable elements that the Europeans exported to the New World.”* (Santiago, 2000: 13-16).

¹⁰ *terreiro* {m} · square · yard · place where the rituals for Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions take place, ritual grounds.

In this deviation, it is possible to observe how the gods, a reference to the diverse religious and spiritual beliefs of the Brazilian people, communicate with each other, despite previous histories of the vanquished and the victors, marked by the triumphs of some over others, with the terrible legacy of persecutions, executions, and the erasure—often incomplete—of the many and varied collective memories of entire peoples, who, in the worship of their respective deities, affirmed and transmitted their cultural identity.

***Mestiçagem* and the Construction of the Brazilian National Identity**

During the centuries of the colony, as saints and Orixás, engaged in dialogue within the churches, the miscegenation presented a complex puzzle to those who visited Brazil. The population they encountered defied easy categorization as either White or Black. The Count of Gobineau, who spent fifteen months in Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro, during 1869/1870, as the French consul, highlighted: “*It is a completely mixed-race population, tainted in blood and spirit, and frighteningly ugly.*” (Lia Osório Machado, 1995: 327-328)¹¹. This quote is not surprising: Gobineau was one of the theorists of white racial superiority, a theory that was becoming hegemonic in Europe.

During the 19th century, a pivotal period in the development of racial theories, the concept of race emerged at the dawn of modernity, during the historical phase of European colonialism. This was a time when scientific, positivist, and evolutionary thought was on the rise, and race was used to explain cultural and social differences in an ideology that exalted European and white dominance over other peoples. In

¹¹ See also: Georges Raedeis, (1988) *O conde Gobineau nu Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra

this narrative, *mestizaje* was presented as a factor of degeneration that hindered progress.

This European racist thinking influenced the ruling elites and intellectuals in Latin America. Even in Brazil, until the end of the 19th century, most Brazilian intellectuals held a pessimistic view of their country, describing it as backward due to the climate, geographical location, and race.

However, the concept of *mestiçagem* that was viewed negatively by European racist thought, was reinterpreted in a positive light, in Brazil, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. This reinterpretation highlighted its potential to promote a gradual whitening of Black and mixed populations, instilling hope for social change, and encouraged immigration. As the idea of whitening was linked to the idea of progress, biological *mestizagem* was set as a mechanism capable of assimilating Blacks and Indigenous peoples into the White race.

Many politicians and intellectuals of the time, including abolitionists like Joaquim Nabuco, believed that progress would only be possible with a more significant number of Whites than Blacks and Indigenous people¹². They supported immigration policy with the argument that white labor was more productive. From this perspective, according to Abdias do Nascimento (2017), the *mestizo* would represent the beginning of the process of eliminating the Black population, seen as the “*first step in the systematic whitening of the Brazilian people*” (Nascimento, 2017: 83), a transitional phase of the whitening process. In this type of view, any form of cultural and religious syncretism could only be seen negatively, as a contamination of what was perceived as the superior European culture that was associated with progress and civilization.

¹² Paradoxically, the most important writer of the time, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, was a mixed-race individual.

At the same time, from the late 19th century, new ideas began to emerge in Latin America. The Cuban José Martí, in his famous book *Nuestra América* (1891), contrasts another America, the Anglo-Saxon one, entrenched in racial boundaries, seeking to transcend the racial conflict through an abstract universalism. Martí, therefore, does not truly address the articulation of the cultures present in Cuba or in the rest of Latin America, but rather overcomes the idea of white and European supremacy. In the first half of the 20th century, both the national elites who took on the task of creating national identities and the scholars who investigated the historical process of building the nation, slowly adopted the concept of *mestiçagem* as the basis for constructing national identity in countries as distinct as Mexico¹³ and Brazil.

The Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (1933, 1998) was the first to develop a punctual historical analysis articulating the mixing of races and cultures present in the Brazilian context, paving the way for an interpretation of religious syncretism.

***Mestiçagem* and Racial Democracy**

In the 1933 classic text *Casa Grande e Senzala*—where “senzala” means shack—Freyre presents a unique perspective on Brazilian society, arguing its superiority over American society. He points out that, while slavery in the United State led to the creation of two distinct populations, one Black and the other White, Brazil’s *mestiçagem* bridged the vast social gap between the “cities” (the large house) of the masters and the shacks of the enslaved people. Miscegenation and mixing of cultures were made possible by the inclusive attitude of Portuguese Catholicism towards Blacks and Indigenous people, a fact that Freyre

¹³ At the beginning of the 20th century, the Mexican essayist and intellectual Justo Sierra Méndez (1848-1912), performed the project of problematization and defense of a *mestizo* identity for Mexico (Santos, 2017).

identifies as a key element in the distinctiveness of Brazilian society. Portuguese Catholicism's characters allowed both miscegenation and syncretism with Indigenous and African beliefs.

According to Freyre, thanks to the miscegenation of Africans, Indigenous people, and whites in colonial society, a more vigorous and more intellectually capable race was shaped in Brazil: *mestizos* and mulattos would not represent a transitional phase toward a "white" nation, but rather the typically Brazilian element of the national society.

Rejecting the claims of racist science that considered mulattoes and *mestizos* incapable of achieving social and intellectual equality with white people, Freyre argued that "people with dark skin," to use a more neutral expression than those created by colonizers, exhibited more excellent leadership abilities than whites or almost-whites, as they were more in tune with the Brazilian environment. Due to this leadership, Brazil was increasingly transforming into a racial democracy, characterized by a nearly unique combination of diversity and unity.

The ideal of racial democracy, a central element of the nationalization campaign, during the *Estado Novo* (1937-1945), the name given to the populist dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, was instrumental in establishing the concept of a *mestizo* nation devoid of racial prejudice and discrimination in the social consciousness (Costa, 2001). This official representation of the nation was positioned as the opposite of the racially segregated and decidedly unconvivial United States (Guimarães, 2007; Seigel, 2009; Skidmore, 1974). As Sansone highlights: "*It was also the period in which, for the first time, the African origins of much of Brazilian popular culture and religion were, to a degree, symbolically incorporated into the official cultural representation of the nation by the Vargas regime.*" (Sansone 2003: 4). However, the state's incorporation of cultural expressions from the Black community, such as samba, feijoadá, and certain Afro-Brazilian religious practices like Candomblé, under the umbrella of Brazilian culture was often a form of folk-

lorization. This contradiction was evident in the continuous persecution of Afro-Brazilian religions and the devaluation or folklorization of Black and Indigenous cultures.

It is undeniable that Gilberto Freyre was excessively optimistic when he wrote that “*miscegenation and the interpenetration of cultures – chiefly European, Amerindian, and African culture – together with the possibilities and opportunities for rising in the social scale traditionally open to non-whites, have tended to mollify the interclass and interracial antagonisms developed under an aristocratic economy,*” with the result that “*perhaps nowhere is the meeting, intercommunication, and harmonious fusion of diverse or, even, antagonistic cultural traditions occurring in so liberal a way as it is in Brazil*” (Freyre 1998: 78). This optimism, however, has been subject to critique and debate in the scholarly community, engaging us in a deeper understanding of the complexities of racial dynamics in Brazil.

Freyre’s concept of “racial democracy” was first challenged in the 1950s, by critics branding it a “myth” exploited by the ruling classes. These elites, who had first used miscegenation in the logic of whitening, a term that refers to the social process, where people of non-white ancestry are assimilated into white society, often resulting in the loss of their original cultural identity, later, promoted a narrative of *mestizo* identity. This narrative aimed to mask the underlying racial tensions: the widespread acceptance of miscegenation, as a norm, was just a tool to deny the existence of racial discrimination. The claim that there are no Whites, no Blacks, that we are all *mestizos*, served to obscure the fact that the profound social inequalities in Brazil are a direct legacy of slavery and the subjugation of Blacks and Indigenous people, by white colonizers. This critique also underscores that structural racism has persisted despite the myth of racial democracy.

In the 1950s, the anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro (1995), although defending Brazilian identity as *mestiza*, does not hesitate to criticize

the concept of racial democracy. For Ribeiro, the existence of racial democracy is contingent upon the establishment of social democracy. Ribeiro's emphasis on the need for social democracy underscores its crucial role in the context of racial democracy. He highlights the class stratification that has marked Brazil's history, with significant inequalities between the rich and the poor, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and the dehumanization of labor relations.

For anthropologist Da Matta (1984), the phrase "*nossa mulataria e os nossos mestiços*" ("our mulattoes and our *mestizos*") should be interpreted as a way of hiding a hierarchical and unequal society: a myth – that of racial democracy – which immobilizes and prevents concrete actions against Brazilian-style racism, "*racismo à brasileira*". This is a silent and latent racism that "*makes injustice something tolerable and difference a matter of time and love*" (Da Matta, 1984: 47).

As we have seen, criticisms of concept of racial democracy have a solid foundation. However, without questioning the criticisms, British anthropologist Peter Wade (2005) suggests a heuristic distinction between the concept of *mestiçagem* as an ideology and as a lived experience by the populations. The ideological dimension that presents *mestiçagem* as an inclusive process, through which everyone can become *mestizo*, is the one that has been the most criticized. Thus, as part of the project of building a nation, ideological mestizaje would marginalize Black and Indigenous people, minimizing or denying the structural racism, left by the European colonization, and the violence perpetrated against people of color, while instead valuing whiteness as a measure of civilization.

However, when we shift our focus to the lived experiences of people, Wade (2005) notes that positive narratives about the convivial aspects of *mestiçagem* are not hard to find. These narratives often transcend the hierarchical and racist aspects that are often tied to a person's social position. For instance, in a description of a low-income neighbour-

hood in Salvador, Brazil, Sansone (2003: 52-53) points out that *"color is seen as important in guiding social and power relationships in some areas and moments, while it is considered irrelevant in others."* The residents perceive a "soft" area of social relations (street corners, parties, neighborhoods, sports, and religion) and a "hard" one (interactions with the police, the world of work, marriage, and dating). This perspective underscores the experience of living in a transitional zone and the consequent development of a *mestizo* consciousness. This consciousness, capable of embracing the contradictions that often arise from racial mixing, is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the human spirit.

Distancing himself from an overly critical view, Wade defends the idea of a multiple *mestiçagem*, characterized by *"many meanings, including the image of a mosaic, composed of different elements and processes, which can manifest within the body, in the family environment, and even within the nation. From this perspective, mestizaje leaves space for many elements, including elements of Black and Indigenous identity, and involves processes of inclusion that go beyond mere discursive rhetoric and superficial masks."* (Wade, 2005: 256)

We will encounter this multiplicity of dimensions in our analysis of religious syncretism in Brazil.

Syncretism, Religious Pluralism and Democracy

Although overly optimistic about racial democracy, the Freyrean narrative, placing *mestiçagem* at the centre of Brazilian national identity, positively impacted socio-cultural dynamics. The concept of *mestiçagem* shifted from biology (the three races) to the interpretation of hybrid culture. In October 1935, the inaugural session of the *Movimento Brasileiro Contra o Preconceito Racial*, held in Rio de Janeiro, prepared the manifesto of Brazilian intellectuals against racial prejudice, aiming

to combat political racism, develop the study of different ethnic groups present in Brazil, and preserve the ideal of the nation and the unity of the Brazilian family. The timid legitimization of the Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions—such as Candomblé and Umbanda in religion, Samba and Capoeira in music and dance and traditional dishes in cuisine—encouraged studies on African elements. In January 1937, the second Congress of Afro-Brazilian Studies was held in Salvador de Bahia. American anthropologist Melville Herskovits presented a paper on “*African Gods and Catholic Saints in the Beliefs of Blacks in the New World.*” Edison Carneiro (1940), a key figure in developing studies on African-rooted cultures in Brazil, reviewed Afro-Brazilian religious ethnography. Sansone (2023) speaks of the synergy between the cultural politics of the *Estado Novo* and the introduction of sociology and anthropology as academic disciplines in Brazilian universities.

Western anthropologists were captivated by the Brazilian religious syncretism, a testament to the remarkable resilience of ancient traditions: the colonial project of a single religion, Catholicism, had failed. The resistance of the ancient gods to the new God, presented as the only and exclusive divinity to the colonized and evangelized peoples by the Catholic Church, was a striking example of cultural continuity. These ancient traditions, far from disappearing, continued in other forms and traces, speaking to humans, who preserved the codes in their memory to interpret their words, even if they were in conditions of physical and moral slavery or under coercive conversion to the new God. The fact that syncretism was not only a phenomenon of the past, linked to the colonial period, concerning Catholicism and African religions, but also of the present, was even more fascinating.

Hidden under syncretic forms, during the colonial and imperial periods, the religions of African-descended populations ceased—at least theoretically—to be persecuted at the end of the 19th century, when Brazil legally became a secular state. Since then, Candomblé, whose