PRETOS VELHOS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS IN PORTUGAL

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INTRODUCTION

In November 1995, I stepped onto a bus in the city of São Paulo. As I was trying to pay the bus fare, I was identified by the bus driver as a ‘portuguesinha.’¹ I sat on the first rows of the bus a conversation started between the man sitting beside me, a mulatto male in his 70s, two white women in their 60s sitting in the second row, and the bus driver. They started by commenting on how much they loved Portugal and the Portuguese, going on to a discussion on how nice the Portuguese were and how they had such a great relationship with everyone. The talk went on as they expanded on how the Portuguese were not racists, had established great relations in Africa and Brazil, and how the relationship between Portugal and Brazil had always been such an exceptional and excellent one.

When I stepped out of the bus, I thought about the comments of those passengers who had spontaneously engaged in conversation with me, and how, even though they had never read Gilberto Freyre, they seemed to share his ideas. Such an experience was not new to me (nor to many other social scientists working in Brazil), as I had often heard Brazilians talk about this subject and praise the great relationship between the two ‘sister nations.’ A whole series of texts critiquing and discussing Freyre’s ideology of Lusotropicalism and the positive qualities of the Portuguese colonization and miscegenation came to my mind.² As I was on my way to

¹ A gentle and caring way of calling a female ‘Portuguese.’
² Gilberto Freyre, a well-known Brazilian sociologist, is the author of Casa Grande e Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves), where he argued that Brazil was constructed as a nation by the Portuguese, Africans and native Indians. Furthermore, it was the Portuguese who were responsible for a special kind of colonialism which promoted miscegenation and harmony among this three ‘races.’ For him, it was the Portuguese adaptability to the tropics that prompted this situation. This argument has been much discussed and criticized over the years. See, among others, Castelo 1998; Almeida 2000; Feldman-Bianco 2001; Bastos, Almeida e Feldman-Bianco 2002; Machado 2002a, 2002b; Padilla 2003.
interview an Umbanda pai-de-santo\(^3\) who had connections with Portugal, I recalled the way the Portuguese themselves, in Portugal, conceptualized that relationship with Brazil, through the lens of their adherence to the recently arrived Afro-Brazilian religions.

I will start this chapter by giving a brief account of how Afro-Brazilian religions have spread in Portugal in the last twenty years, and then move on to characterize this religious scenario from two different points of view. First, I interpret the way that Afro-Brazilian religious leaders (pais and mães-de-santo) conceptualize their religious work, and how they perceive the organization and function of Afro-Brazilian religions in Portugal, especially concerning healing and the improvement of individuals’ well-being. Second, I analyze it from the perspective of the Portuguese practitioners and ‘consumers’ of such religions, focusing mainly on how exotic religious alterity is mixed within an ideological repertoire and ‘tool box’ where such religions appear as a solution for life-crisis situations, where healing, well-being and self-improvement play crucial roles. I collected the data for this chapter through fieldwork I have conducted since 2006 in terreiros\(^4\) in Portugal. My fieldwork included interviews with ritual leaders and their followers, as well as research on the Internet and in Brazil (mainly São Paulo and Fortaleza in temples that have direct connections with Portugal).

**Brazil and Afro-Brazilian Religions in the Old Metropolis**

Portugal has had a long relationship with Brazil, starting with its role as a colonizer between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Portugal—and Lisbon, its capital—was the metropolis. Brazil has always attracted the Portuguese, who emigrated to the New World in search of better life conditions. Brazil was a favorite destination throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the second half of the twentieth century, after the 1974 revolution in Portugal, many Portuguese sympathetic with the old regime fled to Brazil, along with Portuguese returning from the former colonies in Africa, some of which (Angola and Mozambique) had engaged in ferocious civil wars.

\(^3\) Literally father and mother of the saint, the priest or priestess in the Afro-Brazilian religions.

\(^4\) In the Afro-Brazilian religions the word terreiro means both the physical space where rituals take place and the community of worshippers.