

1- The Inspiration of Experience: Black Memories of Catholicism in Brazil

The present work is an integral part of my Masters dissertation – Feast of the Rosary: Iconography and Poetry of a Rite, defended at PPGACP, *Universidade Federal Fluminense*, R.J, Brazil in May 2001. It is an ethnographical study of the “Festa do Congado” [Congado Feast], held in homage to the Holy Virgin of the Rosary by her devoted dancers, the *congadeiros*, in the town of Bom Despacho in Minas Gerais state, Brazil.

The aim of this work is to present an analysis of the oral sources that explain the origin of the *Congada* in the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. But before doing so, the context of this ritual must first be explained.

This feast takes place in different parts of Brazil, and is also known by different names: the Feast of the Congo, Congada, or Reinado. The ritual elements that make up its structure are different in the different places where it occurs. In the north and northeast, the word Congo(s) may refer to the whole feast itself, while in Minas Gerais and Paraná states, this term defines part of the groups that make up the Congad(a)o. Given the hierarchical implications of the ritual, the feast is better known by the name of Reinado [kingdom] in Minas Gerais. These representations encompass variations on the coronations of the kings of Congo, the queen Njinga Nbandi and other characters, as well as variations on the processions, ambassadors and types of dance. Although it is the Virgin of the Rosary who is the main object of homage, other saints, generally linked to black catholicism – including Saint Benedict, Saint Ephigene and Our Lady of Mercy – also tend to be revered in this festive cult.

1 - Bom Despacho and the Feast

Bom Despacho is a middle-sized town in the Alto São Francisco region. It is 140 km from Belo Horizonte, the state capital, to which it is linked by the BR-262 federal highway. The municipality has a population of around 40,000, concentrated in the town itself. The local economy is based on farming, with dairy produce as its main production.

Large-scale properties were formed in this region during the 18th century, when this area passed from being a region of *quilombos* – free settlements of black slaves who had fled the mines – to being occupied by the last of the settlers who had exploited the

mines in the region and were now seeking new ways of life in the *sertões* [Brazilian outback] after the mineral reserves had been exhausted. The establishment of cattle farms and plantations is characteristic of the type of colonization present now in the municipality.

African slaves played an important role in the population of the region and formation of the local culture. Some fled through the *sertões* in search of freedom, while others were imprisoned in the farms, working for their masters. To give an idea of the extent of this trend, the oldest data on the population (Rodrigues, 1968:83) of Bom Despacho dates back to 1813, when of the total 1,532 inhabitants, 973 were registered as black – that is, black or mixed-race, free or captive. In other words, they accounted for more than half the population.

Despite the significant decline in the black population in the municipality since the 19th century – 50% in 1872; 38.80% in 1890; 13.51% in 1940 and 20.81% in 1950 (Queiroz, 1998:49) – its influence on the local culture can still be felt. Not only is it revealed in the Feasts of the *Congado* and *Folia de Reis*, which are incorporated into the population as a whole, but it persists in the “Língua do Negro da Costa” [Language of Blacks from the Coast], which has a vocabulary of African origin and works as a kind of secret code, and is preserved by a group of descendents of slaves who live in Tabatinga, a district of the town where farm workers live.

2 – The feast itself

The *Congado de Nossa Senhora do Rosário* normally takes place at the end of the first half of August, during the so-called “rosary cycle”, which, in Minas Gerais, stretches from May to October. The festive calendar varies according to the municipality. In the case of Bom Despacho, towards the end of July, the Notice Flag is raised as a prelude to the feast, which commences two weeks later, always on a Thursday, with the raising of the Flags of the Saints – Our Lady of the Rosary, Saint Benedict and Saint Ephigene. For five days running, a number of different rites take place: the Raising of the Flags; Paying Penance at the Breakfasts, Lunches and Dinners hosted by the “Festeiros Grandes” or white kings, i.e. those paying penance; on the “day of the feast”, which is always a Sunday, there are the Ambassadors, the Conga Mass, the Procession and Passage of the Crowns; and to close, on the Monday, there is the

Lowering of the Flags. Participating in these rites are seventeen groups of dancers, the Church, the “Festeiros Grandes” and the others paying penance.

The food occupies a central role and driving force to this ritual process, since it represents the sacrificial nature of the penance and the material payment of a debt to a divinity. The banquets enjoyed during the course of the feast act as the unifying link in the exchanges¹ made between the different social elements that participate: those paying penance are obliged to transform the foodstuffs into an offering to the Holy Virgin of the Rosary by the intermediary of their guests, the dancers, who are in turn obliged to receive the offering.

Within this ethnographical context, I sought to demonstrate the coexistence of two different religious systems that are connected within the same ritual: the religious practices coordinated by the Catholic Church, and the ritual codes of the *congadeiros*, which are considered by them to be an expression of the cultural values of their founders, the African slaves sent to the mining region during the colonial period. It was also possible to note that the feast is one of the most important means by which a particular social order is constructed parallel to the dominant social order. In this order, the *Congados* continue to exist even outside the festive period, perpetuating different values to those that the social reality insists on dictating as being the only ones possible.

3 – Background

The first records of the *Congado(a)s* date back to the beginning of the 18th century², but it is known that they existed, though more sparsely, in the Colony back in the 17th century. On writing about formative Brazilian culture in the 18th century, João André Antonil (1997:92) suggested that mill owners allow their slaves to take the following palliative measure for captivity: that they

“create their kings, sing and dance for a few hours honestly during a few days of the year, and enjoy themselves in innocent practices in the afternoon, after having had their feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, Saint Benedict and in the sanctuary in the mill chapel [...].”

Much has been discussed about the origins of the *Congado*. While for Câmara Cascudo it is “the work of slavery that was already Brazilian using black material

¹ See Marcel Mauss : *O Ensaio sobre a dádiva*

² Igarassu, Pernambuco state; 1700 (Bastide, 1971:173)

[...]"(1993:243), other authors hypothesize about the European influence, linking its genesis to the battles of the Middle Ages. According to Bastide (1971), the introduction of the cult of Our Lady of the Rosary to the African continent by Dominican missionaries was an important tool in religious indoctrination, being imposed as a stage of christianization on the enslaved blacks sent to the colonies. Meanwhile, Gomes and Pereira (1988:176) observe that "it would be more accurate" to consider the *Congado* "as having mixed Portuguese, African and Brazilian origins: the catholicism from Portugal supplied the European elements of devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary, the church in Brazil supplied this belief, while the blacks took these ingredients and gave form to the cult and the feast."

Independent of the theoretical hypotheses of scholars on the subject, for the dancers and other participants in this ethnographical expression "the *Congado* is a dance that came from over there in Africa, a dance by the blacks that were captive in the farm slave quarters, who once a year got permission from the master to enjoy themselves and pay homage to the saint" (Zé Amaral, "Capitão de Congo – leader of a group of dancers: 1996).

4 – How everything must have begun: from the ecclesiastical source to the inspiration of the experience

In the iconography of Our Lady of the Rosary, Saint Dominic de Guzman and Saint Catharine of Siena kneel at the feet of the Virgin, who reaches out her hand to both, handing them the rosary while in her arms she holds the baby Jesus.

According to Van der Poel³, the most remote origin of the rosary came with religious hermits, the solitary Desert Fathers: as few of them knew how to read the psalms, they prayed a set number of Our Fathers and Hail Marys using small stones to count them, thereby substituting the psalter of the 150 psalms prayed by men of letters. Later, in the 13th century, the rosary re-emerged as a means of prayer, and was divulged by Saint Dominic de Guzman and the whole Dominican Order, which would use it as a tool of religious instruction in the fight against the Albigensians.

In 1213, the catholics defeated the Albigensians and a chapel was raised at Simon de Montfort in homage to Our Lady of the Rosary at the Stephen of Muret

³ Poel, Francisco Van der. *O Rosário dos Homens Pretos*. Belo Horizonte, Imprensa Oficial, 1981.

Church. This was probably the first sanctuary to be built in the name of the Virgin Mary under that name.

Three centuries later, on October 7, 1571, when, with the assistance of the recitation of the Rosary, the Turks were defeated in Lepanto, Clement XI extended the commemoration of the Rosary to the whole Church, designating the first Sunday in October as the date. In 1913, Pope Pius X changed it to October 7.

According to ecclesiastical precepts, this is the history of the origin and cult of Our Lady of the Rosary, which Dominican missionaries spread from Europe to the colonies. But the dancers hardly know of these roots, and have a quite different story to tell.

In Bom Despacho, as in the whole of Minas Gerais state, two main references are considered to be the sources of inspiration for the feast: the myth of Our Lady of the Rosary, and the legendary story of King Chico. In their different ways, both sources shed light on the poetry of the ritual.

The myth of Our Lady of the Rosary is well known by the dancers and, unlike the legend of King Chico, is not transmitted through official vehicles. During the research, it became apparent that whereas the apparition of Our Lady of the Rosary unites those that participate in the feast, the figure of King Chico oscillates between acceptance and reproval.

While the Virgin saint occupies the whole imagination of the dancers that weave such rich plots for their narratives, the African king, though the subject of reverence as a key player, is often contested for his attitudes towards the dominators. He is, in other words, a very controversial figure. While some ignore him, others contest the legitimacy of King Chico as having introduced the *Congado* into Minas Gerais state, either because there is no definitive proof of his existence, or because he is considered to have been somewhat submissive to the interests of the ruling classes.

On the other hand, the dissemination of his story via the oral tradition has broken the limits of popular memory, penetrating the space of officialdom. Every year, during the festive period, both the press and school groups make efforts to rekindle the story of the legendary African king, to whom the whole state pays respects as the founder of the feast.

4.1- The poetry of the ritual

Since this congress is in English, I will not present the original sources which I made a point of working in the ethnography, preserving the most beautiful regional expressions of the collaborators. The following narratives are syntheses adapted from the field material, following the modalities that occur most frequently in Bom Despacho.

4.1.1 The myth of the origin of Our Lady of the Rosary

Of Our Lady of the Rosary, it is said that she appeared in a farm at the edge of a lagoon in the middle of a forest holding a rosary in her hands. A “bando de índios” [groups of indians] that were passing were the first to see her, but as they were unfamiliar with the image, they kept their distance inside the forest, watching to see how things developed.

A little later, a group of slaves who worked in the area saw her. Unsure of what to do, they decided to call the “senhor” [master] in the “casa-grande” [great house, owner’s house], though afraid of being punished. Initially, the “brancos patrões” [white masters] doubted the blacks’ tale, threatening them with punishment, but since they insisted on the veracity of their account, they decided to check it.

On seeing her, the whites went up into the forest to worship her: they kneeled at her feet, prayed, sung all kind of praises, and invited her to the altar in the “casa-grande”. However, the Virgin remained immobile, unmoved by the appeals of the faithful.

The days went by and the news spread to the neighbourhood. Groups of musicians, priests, nuns and noblemen came to visit her. In their prayers, the whites bid the Virgin go with them to the “casa-grande”, but she would not move. After so many frustrated attempts, the oldest black man in the plantation asked the master to give the slaves a chance to pray to her. Mocking the blacks’ wish, yet intrigued by the reason for that apparition, the master authorized the people from the different nations that lived in that farm to approach the Virgin. The people then went into the forest in groups, following the internal hierarchy of that farm.

To the surprise of the whites, the Virgin responded to the beat of the drums by dancing... She danced, but stayed in the same place. Only two nations were victorious:

the people from the Congo, who made her dance moving a few steps forward, and the people from Mozambique, the last and poorest of the nations, which finally managed to make her leave the forest and go to the altar in the “casa-grande”. When the Lady of the Rosary made to accompany the Mozambique, using one of their drums as a litter, the indians came out of the forest to clear the way with their small axes, so that the chosen black nation could pass through with the Virgin.

A great, unheard-of feast was offered by the “brancos patrões” for all the blacks on the farm for the state of grace they had achieved. However, after the commemoration, the Virgin of the Rosary disappeared fortuitously, returning to the forest. On the next day, all went to seek her at the same place. And only then was the true reason for her apparition revealed: she had not come to stay in the house of the “branco patrão”, but rather to receive the prayers of the blacks suffering in captivity, inspiring them in a movement towards freedom.

The myth told here of Our Lady of the Rosary has a very clear element explaining the hierarchy between the different social groups that participate and join in the feast: the indian is represented by the *Penacho* group (known in other places as the *caboclinho*); the black is divided into two groups, from Congo and Mozambique; the *branco patrão* appears as the host of the feast, i.e. it is he who pays for the feast. Coordinating this structure enters the Church, taking the role of mediator in the relationship of each social group with the Holy Virgin.

Every ritual activity that involves all the participating groups obeys an order based on place of origin, which is evidence of subversion of the slavery hierarch and the values proposed by the myth. According to protocol, in any of the festive ceremonies, Mozambique is always responsible for safeguarding Our Lady. The function of the *Penacho* is to open the way for the Mozambique, while the Congos always take a secondary position. The feast-goers take their place at the back of the procession.

This spatial configuration, reproduced in all the festive processions, shows a game of inversions, where in the public space of the street, the dancers, who are generally members of lower social classes, become the protagonists of the rite, while the feast-goers, bosses in the everyday, take supporting roles.

In this narrative, the myth⁴ is very coherent in its structure. Its plot is well ordered and constructed with a beginning, a middle and an end. Its storyline presents us with a

⁴ See: Claude Levi Strauss: A estrutura dos Mitos.

happening, which in its turn leads to a conflict, which, after being investigated as to how it can be overcome, is finally resolved when the relationship between blacks and whites is inverted.

The essential problem of the myth is to uncover the mystery of the apparition. But before this motive is revealed, some questions arise: who can communicate with the image? who does the saint want to communicate with? how can she be moved from that apparently unsuitable space?

There is a certain ambivalence in the construction of the characters. They take both a singular and plural structure. Our Lady, the master, the old black man, are individualized, while the others appear in the collective: the “bando de índios”, the “brancos patrões”, the people of Congo and the people of Mozambique. Overall, they can be understood as collective units representing the ethnic structure of Brazilian society, as well as the hierarchical implications of this interrelation.

The indians are the first to see the image. As Our Lady does not exist within the symbolic world⁵ of the natives, it has no immediate significance. The construction of this representation will become clear as the plot unfolds. Not knowing the image, the indigenous indian thinks the ‘apparition’ is strange, but does not flee. They hide in the forest and watch what happens to understand the meaning of “that”. Only after they have assessed the facts do they choose to participate in the plot. The indians know the forest, so can open the way and help in solving the problem of transferring the Virgin.

Next, the African slaves see the image. Just like the indians, they do not initially try to hold contact with the Virgin. As they are slaves, they decide to tell the “senhor” or “branco-patrão” about the presence of the female divinity on their property. The myth does not indicate whether they know that sign or not.

The master, the third character in the sequence of the plot, would apparently be the only element closely linked to the image, since it makes up part of his religious world. The language that he employs – prayer – which would supposedly be a normal means of communicating with the Virgin, is excluded as a potential solution to the essential problem of the myth: to make contact to identify the reason for her presence.

The character of the old black man appears to negotiate the slaves’ idea with the master. In the farm, he signifies ancestry, magic wisdom, that which still carries knowledge from the African continent.

⁵ See: Victor Turner: *Le tambour d’affliction – Analyse de Rirual chez lês Ndembu de Zambie.*

The blacks reappear, not as a homogeneous groups, but bipartisan, subdivided by their supposed nations. It is to be read between the lines of the myth that the Congo is a superior nation in the internal hierarchy of the farm. Through singing and dancing, they establish contact with the Virgin, and the vehicle through which the solution of the myth shall be revealed is identified. Though she responds to the fast, joyful beats of their drums, the Saint does not accompany them; they are not the chosen ones.

He who is considered the lowest of the social scale because of his material poverty takes first place. The Mozambique, with his rough clothes, rustic instruments, his slow, sad song is the one chosen to uncover the mystery of the myth.

In the myth, the whites do not speak the language of the Virgin. The “brancos patrões” pray, but the Saint pays no attention, nor does she respond nor communicate through that apparently more suitable language. The white needs black intermediaries to be blessed with the presence of the Virgin of the Rosary in his household.

Apparently, the blacks do not speak the language of the Virgin, since they are not catholic but, in the language of the sacred, their singing and dancing is shown to be the true elements of communication with the Holy Virgin. Otherwise, why would she stand still while the white prayed? Why does she dance when the Congo comes? Why does she consent to be transported by Mozambique? The African drumming takes on a sacred light when the Saint honours it as a means of communication and chooses the drum as a means of locomotion.

Another interesting aspect of this plot is the symbols represented in the scenario of the apparition. Our lady appears in the forest, i.e. out of doors, in a wild place, where indians and animals may live freely. It is also pertinent that the forest, like water, is an important element in the Bantu vision of the cosmos⁶. In his study of slavery between Congo-Angola, Brazil, the Caribbean, Martim Lienhard observes that:

“In the traditional cosmic vision of the *kongos* and the *mbundos*, the sea and the forest are also – or above all – where the ancestral spirits live. The forest, in particular, is considered the source of all energy accumulated in collective history. It is here that the *nkisi* [magic token] or *mikixi* [fetish] reside, powers which grant power over external or internal enemies. Many of the religious practices of the African or American *kongos* allude one way or another to the energies – benevolent or malign – that are concentrated in the *nfinda* [forest] and that are used by the *nganga* or ‘witch-doctors’” (Lienhard,1998:20).

⁶ On analysing black catholicism in Brazil, when mentioning the *Congadas*, Bastide states that: “From the outset it was a Bantu feast, where the nagos and the *daomeanos* got angry. Later, it put the Congos in dispute against the Angolas, and these against the Mozambiques [...]” (1971:173).

The master and his people are associated to the space within the house, with the blacks bound to this space. Although the Virgin accompanies the captives to the Casa Grande to confer them legitimacy and confirm that it is with them that she is establishing a link, she returns to the forest the next day, for it is in the outside space that this connection must be made. The sacred space is outside the domestic area of the white, the socially dominant element.

To recall, the Virgin appears at the water's edge: at the edge of a lagoon. In other tales, it is by the sea that she appears, and in the hymns of the *Congado*, she often appears with the Bantu name *Kalunga*, which also means death, master and mistress. This constant reference to waters refers to the question of the diaspora, when the Africans were removed by force to the Americas, and could both reflect the memory of the journey to captivity and also the link to the motherland, presenting a utopian connotation as a point of return to the African continent.

Another interesting symbolic aspect relates to the rosary that the Virgin is holding in her hands when she appears. On explaining the origin of the rosary, Van der Poel mentions the use of pebbles by the religious hermits, which they used to count the number of Our Fathers and Hail Marys already prayed. According to some dancers, this same process took place among the slaves who, without any beads to make their prayers on the plantation, used the beads of tears of Our Lady, i.e. the beads of the rosary, with the same aim. This being the case, the rosary is an initiatory symbol, identifying the Virgin and the feast that will exist as soon as Our Lady comes to demand freedom for the slaves.

Concluding, in this narrative we observe a core where knowledge is reprocessed. Three elements remain to give shape to the structure of the plot: the description of an oppressive situation lived by the black slave, the symbolic reversion of this situation when the Virgin is removed from the waters and the establishment of a hierarchy founded on the framework of the myth, whereby the black rediscovers human equality. Thus, the collective is superimposed on the particular and the partial overcoming of ethnic diversity welds the collective black act in a strategy of strength and organization against the common rival.

4.1.2 – The story of King Chico

It is said that King Chico, an African sovereign from the Congo, was imprisoned together with his family and tribe and sent as a slave to Brazil. During the journey across the ocean, he loses his whole family, with the exception of his son, and part of his tribe. On arriving in Brazil, he is sent to work in the mines of Vila Rica, where, despite all the hardships of his condition, not only does he manage to buy his own certificate of freedom, but also frees the other members of his tribe that had suffered the same fate, including the only son that survived the rough Atlantic crossing.

Once free, King Chico works during holy days and days of rest to make enough money to buy the freedom of his compatriots, who initially doubt his purpose. The first to be freed is his own son. Together, father and son work to free a third man. Thus, in a continuous, growing movement, each African freed by Chico Rei joins the group with the purpose of freeing the others.

A number of feats are told about him. It is said that when he organized religious processions, collecting money to build the chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary, this was a cover up for the real purpose of gathering funds to free the black slaves.

In his quest to increase the number of slaves to be freed, King Chico bought an old, abandoned mine, Encadideira, and even though its old owner thought it impossible for any precious metal to be extracted from there, the African sovereign and his companions in fate managed to extract exactly that which they needed to realize their dreams.

As time went by and the popularity of King Chico grew, the freed blacks came to occupy the whole of Morro da Cruz hill in Vila Rica, and as buying freedom was permitted, the whites could do nothing. One day, Vila Rica awoke to the sound of a great feast – the feast of the Congo – where the African king was crowned and celebrated as the king of the blacks of Vila Rica. From then on, it is said that the *Congado* spread through the mining lands as a moment for commemorating the greatness of the African people who had been removed forcibly from their motherland.

In this retelling, the African king loses his kingdom and family and is deported to distant, unknown lands, where he becomes a slave and suffers all possible privations until he manages to turn the tables, using his attributes as ex-sovereign.

No inter-group conflict or conflict between the different social groups is cited, just the individual suffering. The quest for reestablishing self-dignity and the creation of a network of ethnic solidarity form the backbone of the story. The covering up of the real reason for constructing the Chapel of the Rosary, as well as the purchase of the

Encardideira mine is mentioned, but no obstacle from the ruling social group is put in his way; they seem to turn a blind eye to the clandestine intentions of the African king.

Devoid of tension, this story is wrapped in a dreamworld where the Africans and the descendents reach redemption without passing through any confrontation with the other, who imprisons them.

In this plot, then, it is the individual qualities of the African sovereign that deserve attention. In adversity, King Chico is persistent and friendly, becoming a great negotiator of the interests of blacks from the whites. In the refuge of the mine, the African worked hard, stayed strong, believed in his mission and encountered wealth beyond the reach of the whites. Within material that had been rejected lay the chance to turn the tables. Then, the winds change direction and lady luck takes his side: “he became Somebody”. This man, he’s black, but he’s rich and free. He can come and go as he pleases. He turns the tables: buys his companions and frees them. While he accepts the rules of the dominators, at the same time he imposes his own.

It is at this point that the story of King Chico starts to be questioned by the dancers. Those who condemn his actions consider that he takes a conciliatory position, and understand that his personal interests took first place over his duties to his compatriots; King Chico did not directly resist the slavery regime. In other words, if he was so rich, why did he not take Vila Rica? Why did he not resist? Here, the controversy surrounding this character relates to his political stance: to negotiate or to resist. The conflict of this story is not restricted to the space of the *Congado*, but is much wider and permeates discussions on the position of blacks within Brazil.

Meanwhile, for those who admire King Chico, the most relevant issue is that he did not abandon his people to their fate, but inspired and commanded a highly individual movement for freedom, adapting it to the conditions of the time. His greatest legacy was to leave a permanent mark on a slave society of the uncomfortable memory of the sovereignty of an African people.

But the work of King Chico was not over yet. On freeing so many captives, he sought to reinvent an ethnic identity of his companions in the diaspora, constructing a community on Morro da Cruz hill, where he formed his kingdom even within a slave society. Cradled by the Holy Virgin of the Rosary, who protects them from the wrath of the whites, the great stabilizing link in the tribal dissonances will be the drumbeat of the *Congado*.

Independent of this conflict between the recognition and negation of King Chico as the person to have introduced the *Congada* into Minas Gerais State, what cannot be denied is the symbolic space that he occupies in the original line of permeation of the ritual.

From what I could pick up from my field observations, this story has more positive than negative aspects, since it relives the issue of the African diaspora and the subsequent splintering of the subjugated nations. Above all, it represents the possibility of negotiation and restructuring of the ethnic identity through a cultural manifestation that has persisted and remained since the 18th century in an overridingly adverse environment.



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