Two Facets of Afro-Brazilian Neo-Traditionalism: New Yorubaness and African Islam

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is a comparative description of different trajectories in the formation of neo-traditional communities within the frames of trans-oceanic societies with the example of the Afro-Brazilian population. It focuses on the development of new identities on the base of re-invention of ethnic and/or ethno-confessional “roots” in the New World before and after the abolition of slavery. The increased focus on Africa in the history and culture of the Afro-Latin communities led to the re-interpretation of a homogenized African ethnicity, as well as of various ethnic and/or pseudo-ethnic identities, modern yorubanness being one of the most persistent. Yorubanness implies a religious and cultural entity at a transcontinental scale combining a local ethnic base with the pan-African and trans-Atlantic dimensions. The “re-invention” of Afro-Brazilian Islam as another facet of Afro-Brazilian neo-traditionalism may be looked upon on its own and as a part of the Yoruba narrative.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilians, Yoruba, Islam, neo-traditional communities, Trans-oceanic societies.

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The formation of neo-traditional communities has been a typical feature of many trans-oceanic societies. Such societies began to develop since the fifteenth century in the overseas colonies of the European states. Their economy and demography were connected with slave trade. Despite natural and violent assimilation, linguistic and cultural creolization, the centrifugal movements directed against cultural homogenization persisted. Social and legal inequality contributed to the development of neo-traditionalism as a form of protest, based on reinterpreted or re-invented ethnic or ethno-confessional origins of the slaves. A tendency to go back to the alleged roots (cf. the famous “Roots” of Alex Haley, with a fictional story of the writer’s ancestry) grew stronger since the end of slavery and became particularly visible due to the development of the African-American and Afro-Latin movement in the New World. The increased focus on Africa in the history and culture of the Afro-Latin communities led to the re-invention of a homogenized African ethnicity.

Being “African” rather than Wolof, Fulbe or Zulu should not be seen as an entirely new phenomenon. Well before Leopold Senghor wrote about “Negritude”, many people had been considered African, either because they were brought directly from the African shores or due to the fact that they could not explain where exactly they were born. One such example is that of Nicholas Said. He was born in Borno, near the Lake Chad, then enslaved and brought to the Ottoman Empire and Russia. Afterwards he went to Britain, Canada and the United States of America, where he joined one of the "color" regiments of the federal army in 1863 (Said 1873). In his military documents, Nicholas Said indicated his birthplace as “Africa” without any more specific details. When the slaves were baptized in Brazil, they were listed as Nago (Yoruba), Gege (Dahomeyans, Fon), Tapa (Nupe) and more rarely “Africans” or “Creoles”. The ethno-cultural creolization went quickly, and by the end of the nineteenth century many black Brazilians could only be sure that their ancestors had come to America from Africa. The only indisputable exception was connected with religion. Some of the slaves were Muslims or frequented different houses of Candomblé.

Since the end of slavery there was a need to include the history of Africans in Brazil into the national historical narrative. With a few exceptions, the knowledge about the ancestry of the former slaves was then restricted to a list of pseudo-ethnic groups such as Gege, Ketu or Congo-Angola. This list became the cornerstone of ethno-confessional divisions within the Candomblé. The study of Afro-Brazilian history and culture was influenced by the contemporary European science and value system. It was in this context that the Afro-Brazilian religions were reinterpreted as polytheism, an intermediate link between “primitive pantheism and cults of ancestors” and monotheism (in its Christian Catholic version). The Yoruba worship of orishas was now seen as a standard polytheist religion. As a result, the Candomblé was reconstructed and became closer to the scholarly interpretation of the religions of Ancient Greece or Ancient Egypt. Until the mid-twentieth century, the Brazilian authorities and the press regularly condemned “the barbarous cult”, but nowadays this criticism is mostly confined to the Protestant circles.

Among those who played an important role in the reinterpretation of Afro-Brazilian heritage, a special place belongs to Gilberto Freire (1900-1987), a famous Brazilian anthropologist, sociologist, historian and journalist. Freire advanced the concepts of racial democracy (democracia racial) and Luso-Tropicalism (lusotropicalismo). He stressed the role of the civilization mission of the Portuguese in Asia, Africa and America, the interaction of various peoples within the plantation society, primarily in his work “Casa-grande e Senzala”, in English translation, “Masters and Slaves” (Freire 1986). In this and other books, Freire wrote...
about the joint African-Portuguese colonization of Brazil. He also paid special attention to the Brazilian cuisine created on the basis of the European and African recipes and a unique combination of local and imported ingredients. In this way, a particular “Brazilian race” was created, according to Freire (on the influence and work of Freire see e.g. Bastos etc., 2008). This approach has been criticized by more recent researchers and political activists.

Under the influence of Christianity, the worship of ancestral spirits and forces of nature brought by the slaves from Africa to the New World became less pragmatic in its character. The growing elements of mysticism and magic were then converted into an element of national heritage and a spiritual value. Nowadays, the Afro-Brazilian cultural and historical heritage is usually understood in close connection with the mystical outlook which is typical of the syncretic cults (Candomblé, Umbanda, etc.). These cults have developed into a range of Afro-Brazilian religions. They have also become popular among Brazilians of the European origin, as some houses of Candomblé welcomed the outsiders who would be interested in their rituals. At the same time, a few houses opted for the Africanization of their tradition and pantheon, rejecting any elements of syncretism with Christianity (for more details see e.g. Tall 202, Capone 2010). Successful integration of various African traditions into Brazilian religious culture can also be regarded as a result of the policy of racial democracy. The need to accept the Afro-Brazilian religions as a component of national heritage does not always suit certain circles of the Brazilian society, e.g. in the rich Southern states where relatively recent immigration from Europe prevails.

Not all the African peoples were remembered in the process of Afro-Brazilian history re-invention. Among the real and imaginary groups which supplied slaves to Brazil, only few have been studied in detail and popularized by “their” houses of Candomblé. The leading position here belongs to the Yoruba. It is the spiritual heritage of the Yoruba people that is cherished in Brazil. The concept of Yorubaness, which historically referred only to the region of Oyo in today’s Nigeria, spread over a much larger territory, involving a great number of peoples and languages in West Africa. Nowadays, being Yoruba implies a religious and cultural entity at a transcontinental scale, an ideology spreading under the plea of preserving the cultural heritage. The Yoruba language has become a symbol of the so-called Yoruba Atlantic complex uniting the Anglophones in Nigeria, Lusophones in Brasil, Francophones in Benin and Hispanophones in Cuba and Uruguay, together with a set of spiritual practices centered on the worship of the Orishas. Yoruba is thus a rare African language which has been taught and studied abroad far beyond the university language departments. Several textbooks of the Yoruba language have been published in Brazil (Almeida 2001, Omidire 2004, etc.).

The Yoruba culture and its multiple facets have become one of the most studied themes in the field of African studies. A great deal of research has been carried out by indigenous scholars, including those Nigerian historians and archaeologists of Yoruba origin who became main opponents of the “Negritude” generalization. “Yoruba”, or ‘Yorubaness”, has grown into a scientific and ideological concept which attracting historians, ethnologists, demographers and specialists in culture and religion studies in Europe and America. To study Yoruba also means to study African religions and syncretic cults of African origin in America, especially the Afro-Brazilian tradition of Candomblé. At a closer sight, it becomes clear that Candomblé is not equal to the “Yoruba religion”, even though the Yoruba houses have “eaten”, using a local expressions, the tradition of the Gege and are now in the process of “eating” the Congo-Angolan cults of African origin. The latter seem more introvert and thus cannot compete with the reconstructed Yoruba Candomblé.
The visible prevalence of the Yoruba elements in modern Candomblé and in Afro-Brizilian culture as a whole cannot be explained in demographic terms. Historically, the Nago (Yoruba) did not represent a majority among the slaves with the exception of Bahia in the nineteenth century (see e.g. Lovejoy 1994). Therefore, all claims to the Yoruba substrate in Afro-Brazilian ethnic and confessional history lack substance. These claims hide another story, that of systematization and integration of various cults under the pressure of new Yorubaness. This pressure, in its turn, has grown out of voluntary cooperation between scholars and priestly elites in Africa, North and South America. The former have been fascinated by the prospective future of Yoruba studies, while the latter saw the advantages of the “restored” religious tradition. Besides common enthusiasm at the sight of the newly discovered pantheon, there was a certain element of profit-seeking as well. Since 1930s, the new Yorubaness has also attracted some Brazilian politicians who were eager to promote this concept within the framework of “racial democracy”. Nowadays, the Yoruba names are common not only in the public spaces connected with Afro-Brazilian history and culture. These names also reflect new trends in sub-national patriotism, first of all in Bahia. The success of new Yorubaness was not confined to Brazil. Driven by the model and sometimes common denominator of “Yoruba”, various African-American and Afro-Latin religions (Haitian Voduism, Cuban Santeria, etc.) have attracted new adepts. All these religions have claimed a venerable African ancestry. The concept of “Yoruba” has also reached African-American intellectual elites in USA as well as a growing number of followers in Europe (Falola 2004, Omidire 2004, Olupona 2008, Hucks 2012). There are numerous websites dedicated to Ifa-Orisha cults, which are often called “Yoruba religion”. The Internet resources contain a large amount of data on Yoruba ethnic history, the Yoruba language, annual divinations of the oracle from Ile-Ife (the sacred city of all Yoruba) and the Ife calendar.

Modern Yorubaness in Brazil and elsewhere could be treated as a religious tradition or an exotic subculture inspired by occultism and modern New Age movements, another attempt to overcome the spiritual vacuum compared to the earlier interest in Yoga, Shamanism or Wicca. One could suppose that after a random search of various new religious practices not yet experienced finally came the turn of African cults. However, these cults do not only lead their adepts to the African roots and ancestral homeland. It is important that transnational Yorubaness has a specific ethnic base in South Western Nigeria. This region of Nigeria is the home of the Ifa-Orisha cults, sending priests and receiving followers from the overseas “houses”. Brazilian Bahia has become a “second Nigeria”, another place where the adepts of Candomblé go searching for the most authentic rituals. The worship of the Orishas has thus developed into a large trans-Atlantic network which united West Africa, North and South America and Europe. Other African-American religions have followed, creating their own transnational communities. One example is that of modern Haitian Voduism, also known as Vodun or Voodoo. Thus religion has obtained recognition in Benin and Haiti. In North America and Europe, the Vodun deities are often identified with the Orishas. However, the attempts to reconstruct one more African pantheon have been limited by the already mentioned success of new “Yoruba religion” (Nicolau 2013, 2016).

Most Afro-Brazilian neo-traditionalists are quite tolerant and open to the adepts of other religions. At the same time, the spiritual leaders of modern Candomblé claim superiority of their religion as well as its great antiquity. Its origins are said to go back to the most ancient of African civilizations, that of Ile-Ife, and in more radical versions to that of the Ancient Egypt. In order to support the “genealogy” of Candomblé and Umbanda, the similarities between
Yoruba and Egyptian civilization have been popularized; oral tradition and archaeology have been widely used to this objective. The Yoruba spiritual heritage, and especially that of Bahia, has also found a literary representation in the novels of Jorge Amado as well as Umberto Eco’s “Foucault’s Pendulum”, where Candomblé and Umbanda are described as a system of preservation and transmission of secret mystical knowledge. An excellent example of new Yorubaness may be found in de Almeida’s “Moiyalé Amkhara” (de Almeida 2005). The main character of this novel is an Ethiopian prince-turned-slave in Bahia of the seventeenth century, then becoming the ambassador of Abyssinia in Spain It is characteristic that the first name of the prince is taken from the Yoruba language. For most readers in Brazil, Yoruba is the most known language of Africa, so it doesn't matter that it is not spoken in Ethiopia. For the Ethiopian Christians of the seventeenth century, the Yoruba pagan name of the prince would be absolutely inconceivable.

New Yorubaness as a facet of Afro-Brazilian neo-traditionalism is an interesting phenomenon, as it combines a local ethnic base with the pan-African and trans-Atlantic dimensions. The “Yoruba religion” has entered the sphere of New Age spiritual practices in Europe. However, “Blackness” and “Yoruba” are still strongly inter-related. In the “white” South of Brazil, both concepts remain foreign, dangerous and, in the best case, exotic. The concept of “Yoruba” is not restricted to the worship of the Orishas. In Nigeria, there the “traditional” religion coexists with Christianity and Islam (Ryan 1977); the latter may be seen as another facet of Afro-Brazilian neo-traditionalism. Islam has been a minority religion in Latin America and the Caribbean for several centuries. If the hypothetical pre-Columbian presence of Muslim Arabs and West Africans is not taken into consideration, one can surely describe the arrival of Islam in the New World as a post-1492 phenomenon (Gomez 2005). The role of Muslims on the early stages of the Spanish and Portuguese conquista is again far from clear, even though this topic has become rather popular among Latin American Muslims of late. While the impossibility of overt adherence to Islam was evident in the colonies of the Catholic kings of Spain and Portugal, to speak about a Muslim majority among the slaves would be an exaggeration not confirmed by any historical evidence. However, some so called African “nations” (Mandinga, Hausa, Fula, Tapa, Bornu, as they were registered in the acts of baptism and in other official documents) were known as to be originally “Moor” (“Mahometan”, “Turk”) or at least influenced by Islam, as were e.g. the Nago (Yoruba) in Brazil. With a few exceptions, the representatives of all such “nations” were brought from West Africa. This means they were undoubtedly Sunni and Malikites. The mazhab of imam Malik was not the first form of Islam to penetrate into Bilad al-Sudan, but it was by large the strongest one, shaping the development of the Muslim umma in Western and Central Sudanic Africa during the whole period of Trans-Atlantic slave trade. In 1835, the famous “Nago war”, also known as the “rebellion of the Malês (Muslims)”, in Bahia resulted in a large-scale persecution of Afro-Brazilian Muslim population (Reis 1993, 2003). Many of them were sent back to West Africa, where the “Brazilian” communities still exist nowadays. The criminalization of Arabic script contributed to the decline of local written tradition (Dobronravin 2014). Many documents written in this “subversive” script, including books and wooden boards used by local Muslims, were confiscated by the police and then burnt. Emigration to Africa, either forced or voluntary, resulted in a drastic reduction of the Muslim communities in Brazil. Afro-Brazilian Muslims still retained some of their rituals, such as the Islamic salutations, but the number of those who could read and write Arabic was now minimal. Most became practically monolingual, speaking Portuguese and a
little Yoruba. By the middle of the twentieth century, the old Afro-Brazilian Islam had completely disappeared.

Only at the turn of the twenty-first century did the country once see the numbers of Muslims growing rapidly. This new surge partly resulted from the African immigration. More and more Africans are now coming to study or teach in Brazilian universities, and quite a few are Muslims. Besides, various forms of trans-Atlantic communication have been re-established between Brazil and West Africa, especially with Nigeria. A Nigerian cultural centre was opened in Salvador. An Islamic centre (with a mosque) in the city is now attended by local Muslims regardless of their origin. The imam of the mosque came from Nigeria, thus renewing the Yoruba tradition of Islamic scholarship in Brazil. The 1835 uprising is now being studied in Brazilian schools and universities as part of the national history curriculum. This is especially visible in Bahia. The reinterpretation of the events that took place in 1835 has resulted in a certain “re-invention” of Afro-Brazilian Islam. The uprising has become one of the themes of the carnival in Salvador, there exists even a local rap, which praises the fight of the "Malês" and promotes the conversion of the Afro-Brazilians into Islam as a religion of struggle against injustice and inequality. Most participants of the 1835 rebellion were Nago (Yoruba), so their story is often seen as an element of the Yoruba narrative, not opposed to the worship of the Orishas. This tolerance, close to syncretism, does not significantly differ from that found in the ancestral homeland of the Yoruba people in Nigeria.
References


