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Blessed Beats: Religious Profanation and Evangelical Syncretization from *Samba* to *Carnaval Gospel*

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Abstract

This article examines Evangelical carnaval in Brazil to argue that anthropological writing on syncretization expresses a theoretical gap or shortcoming. In several large Brazilian cities, Evangelicals are currently organizing carnaval parades and performing samba music with percussion instruments. Many Evangelical adherents regard samba as spiritually hazardous because the music genre is perceived to hold Afro-Brazilian religious force. Such an appraisal barred fusions between proselytization and samba in the past, but Evangelical carnaval performers offer a new mode of syncretization that produces fusions previously deemed impossible. This article argues that this mode can be described as Evangelical syncretization and that such mergers are characterized by religious profanation. Participants in Evangelical carnaval codify samba as "cultural" and argue that no music genre is intrinsically malevolent. This semiotic ideology, in combination with a proselytization technique called *estratégia*, makes possible Evangelical participation in patrimonial practices associated with Afro-Brazilian religion and allows Evangelicals to employ cultural phenomena as missionary armaments. [carnaval, syncretization, religion, Evangelical Christianity, music, Agamben]

Resumo

Este artigo trata o carnaval gospel no Brasil e argumenta que a literatura antropológica sobre sincretização apresenta uma lacuna teórica. Em grandes cidades brasileiras, evangélicos atualmente organizam desfiles de carnaval e tocam samba-enredo com instrumentos de percussão. Muitos evangélicos consideram o samba espiritualmente

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perigoso, porque eles percebem o gênero musical como um repositório de força religiosa afro-brasileira. Essa avaliação barrou fusões entre cultos evangélicos e samba no passado, mas os grupos de carnaval gospel oferecem um novo modo de sincretização que permite fusões novos. Esse modo pode ser descrito como sincretização evangélica e essas fusões são caracterizadas por profanação religiosa. Os participantes do carnaval gospel codificam o samba como cultura e argumentam que nenhum gênero musical é intrinsecamente malévolo. Essa ideologia semiótica, combinada com uma técnica de proselitização chamada estratégia, possibilita a participação evangélica em práticas patrimoniais associadas à religião afro-brasileira e deixa evangélicos empregar a arma da cultura. [carnaval, sincretização, religião, cristianismo evangélico, música, Agamben]

Introduction

During fieldwork in São Paulo, Brazil, in July 2018, a participant of the Batucada Abençoada (Blessed Beats)—the percussion band of the Evangelical Church Bola de Neve (BdN, Snowball Church)—sent me a digital video of the band's performance during the 2018 carnaval.[1] The clip opens with a view on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, accompanied by synthesizer music.[2] During the opening shot, a low, male voice states: "I think that Rio de Janeiro is the place where people represent Brazilian culture more than any other place and I think the church has made the right decision to offer the people [there] the strongest of all experiences, which is the experience of happiness with Jesus."[3] The remainder of the clip shows smiling samba percussionists parading on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, accompanied by a mixture of *samba-enredo* music and electronic music.

BdN's depiction of Rio de Janeiro as the place par excellence to perform during carnaval and the church's joyful Evangelical deployment of *samba-enredo* stand out for a number of reasons. Three decades ago, practically none of the Brazilian Evangelical churches would have organized street parades during the week(s) of carnaval. For a long time, churches strongly opposed carnaval because, among other reasons, leaders fervently disapproved of the temporary (pagan) deviation from Biblical norms. Silas Malafaia, an influential Brazilian pastor of the Pentecostal Church Assembléia de Deus Vitória em Cristo, defines carnaval as a pagan feast that was authorized by the Roman Catholic Church; he urges Evangelicals not to take part in the festivities (Malafaia 2018).

BdN's carnaval performance also stands out because Brazilian Evangelicals understand carnaval as a time and place of dangerous Afro-Brazilian religious powers. Such an understanding is embedded in historical mergers between

Afro-Brazilian and European traditions within Brazilian carnaval practices. Brazilian carnaval music (*samba-enredo*) is one of those cultural practices that exemplifies the presence of African traditions within contemporary carnaval, according to many Brazilian Evangelicals. Narratives about the origins of samba emphasize the historical threads between the *batucada* (beat) of *samba- enredo* and the percussion rhythms at the core of the Afro-Brazilian religious practices that have dance, spirit possession, and trance as their central religious experiences (see also Araújo and Dupret 2012; Browning 1995; Capone 2019; Rocha and Silva 2013). Of special concern to the Evangelical followers is the association between Afro-Brazilian spirit possession, induced by percussion instruments and carnaval practices, as most understand Afro-Brazilian deities as demonic entities that can only be warded off with help of the Holy Spirit.

Despite these negative appraisals of Brazilian carnaval and *samba-enredo*, a number of Brazilian Evangelical churches—including BdN—have started to organize *carnaval gospel* (Evangelical carnaval) parades that include *samba-enredo* performances. How can these mergers between carnaval practices and Evangelical proselytization take place, given the Evangelical concerns regarding carnaval, samba, and Afro-Brazilian religion? How do these Evangelical groups incorporate objects and performances that other Evangelical groups consider to be spiritually perilous? And what does this tell us about current religio-cultural fusions in Brazil?

Syncretic Pentecostalism and Evangelical Syncretization

This article argues that the fusion of proselytization and carnaval should be understood as *Evangelical syncretization* made possible by *religious profanation*. As I argue, these terms help us to unravel the complexities of religious struggle and change in contemporary Brazil, a country that was characterized by the hegemony of Roman Catholicism but has witnessed an explosive growth of Born-Again Evangelical and Pentecostal groups since the 1980s. I propose these two terms to highlight the limitations of earlier works on religio-cultural fusion in Brazil.

Many fusions between Evangelical practices and other cultural and religious practices in Brazil can adequately be described as "syncretic Pentecostalism" (Birman and Leite 2000, 2845), which Patricia Birman and Márcia Pereira Leite define as a continuation *and* a reinvention of the magic and possession of Catholic and Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. Syncretic Pentecostalism denotes a process in which Pentecostal Churches single out objects and performances that are generally considered to hold perilous spiritual power and reconfigure them as unambiguously demonic. Such processes of incorporation and translation (Meyer 1999) occur throughout the world where Pentecostalism takes root (Robbins 2004). One well-known Brazilian example concerns the church services of the Pentecostal Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD, Universal Church of the Kingdom of

God), where objects and signs that refer to Afro-Brazilian spiritual presence are ritually presented as manifestations of the devil that can subsequently be eradicated by means of *descarrego* (deliverance) sessions.

The concept that Birman and Leite propose takes seriously the language and the practices of rupture that form part of Pentecostal and Born-Again Christian movements (Mafra 2011a; Robbins 2004), without losing sight of the religio-cultural continuities in Brazilian society. As many scholars acknowledge, Brazilians who identify with very different religious traditions often share deep-felt assumptions about spiritual presence as a result of the dominance of popular Catholicism (which includes Afro-Brazilian and indigenous elements), reproduced in public processions and festivities (Montes 1998; Souza 2013). Pentecostal and Born-Again Christian movements do not agree with many of the Catholic and Afro-Brazilian practices and representations because they share the idea that these contain (malevolent) spiritual power.

However, the fusion that we witness during carnaval gospel is different from the syncretic Pentecostalism that Birman and Leite describe. When I asked about the spiritual power of *samba-enredo* music, Evangelical carnaval participants generally denied that it has *intrinsic* spiritual properties, good or bad. These Evangelical participants generally defined samba music as "cultural," and explained that it may therefore be part of their Evangelical performances. In short, the participants I interviewed did not appropriate objects and practices which adherents of other religious traditions consider spiritually powerful to exemplify the presence of the devil and the power of the Holy Spirit to defeat him. The Evangelical adherents denied that these objects and practices—*samba-enredo*—had intrinsic spiritual powers; they further argued that they could be invested with the (different) spiritual power of the Holy Spirit when used in their parades.

I propose the term *Evangelical syncretization* as a heuristic concept to describe the process in which Evangelical carnaval groups employ *samba-enredo*. I argue that this kind of fusion deserves its own label because it involves what I call *religious profanation*: the mobilization of theological-semiotic arguments to counter the claim that certain objects and practices have intrinsic (perilous) spiritual powers and to present these objects and practices as possible channels of the power of the Holy Spirit. The theological-semiotic argument that Evangelical carnaval groups present holds that Brazilian aesthetic forms can be used for Evangelical purposes as long as they are enveloped in a Christian environment and accord with Biblical prescriptions. Evangelical carnaval participants claim that *samba-enredo* belongs to God and that there are no particular music genres or practices that intrinsically stand out as spiritually malevolent. Carnaval gospel participants support this claim by pointing to the fact that music is "cultural" and not "religious."

To make these points I describe and analyze samba gospel and Evangelical carnaval performances. This provocation is based on two decades of fieldwork with

Brazilian Evangelicals, during which I paid special attention to sound and music (Oosterbaan 2009, 2017). In the preparation of this article, I looked specifically at Brazilian carnaval. The material for this article was collected between 2011 and 2018. Between 2011 and 2016, I focused on Evangelical *blocos* (carnaval street parades) in Rio de Janeiro, paying specific attention to the Projeto Vida Nova Church (PVN, New Life Project). In 2011, I observed the *bloco* of the Comunidade Evangélica Internacional Zona Sul (CEIZS, International Evangelical Community of the South Zone) and in 2011, 2014, and 2016, I witnessed the PVN *blocos*. In 2011, I interviewed PVN participants during and after the parade; in 2014 and 2016, I interviewed PVN members and leaders before, during, and after the parades. In 2018, I extended my research to São Paulo and Salvador da Bahia. In São Paulo, I interviewed BdN members and participated in several church services and one carnaval rehearsal, which allowed me to play the *caixa* (snare drum) with Batucada Abençoada participants. In Salvador da Bahia, I interviewed the head pastor of the Igreja Batista Missionária da Independência (IBMI, Missionary of Independence Baptist Church), that annually organizes the Evangelical *bloco* Sal da Terra (Salt of the Earth). Beyond on-site ethnography, I collected church DVDs and audio-visual clips, distributed via social media (WhatsApp and Facebook).

In what follows, I first describe a practice that Evangelical carnaval participants called *estratégia* (strategy). Second, I specify what I mean with Evangelical syncretization and religious profanation in relation to earlier theoretical discussions on syncretism and antisyncretism. Third, I describe how, historically, carnaval objects and practices were identified as "cultural," while they were also regarded as containers of transcendent powers, allowing for ongoing ambiguities that trouble many Pentecostal adherents. Fourth, I explain how samba gospel performers and carnaval gospel groups try define carnaval practices as "cultural" *and* as spiritually neutral—allowing room for the work of the Holy Spirit.

Readers note that I begin by engaging several theoretical discussions and offer an abbreviated description of the history of the carnaval parades before I turn to the ethnographic material. Such an exposé may test the readers' patience, yet this offers the necessary background to demonstrate why we need an additional approach to religio-cultural fusion in Brazil.

Estratégia*, Evangelical Syncretization, and Religious Profanation*

Questioned about their involvement in a festival riddled with behavior that Brazilian Evangelicals commonly describe as sinful, the Evangelical participants that I interviewed described their own carnaval gospel as *estratégia* (strategy), a type of proselytization that, according to them, deliberately takes place in perilous environments and purposely employs aesthetic forms associated with sinful lifestyles. As I show below, *estratégia* is an emic term that my interlocutors use to argue

why they should parade publicly during the week(s) of carnaval, a time they and many other Evangelicals recognize as hedonist and ungodly. According to the participants, it is possible and necessary to evangelize amid the sinners without participating in their sinful acts. Parading during carnaval amid the "worldly" parades of the unconverted, allows the churches to preach the gospel in contexts where they deem it most needed. As I have described elsewhere in more detail (Oosterbaan 2017), Evangelical participants would monitor each other to make sure that they would not stay on the streets after the parade was finished, to avoid possible involvement with the ungodly festivities.

While denoting Evangelical carnaval as *estratégia* offers a powerful argument to the participants about why they should parade on the street, it does not resolve the question that bothered many Brazilian Evangelicals that disapprove of carnaval gospel: How can BdN and similar Evangelical groups legitimize the use of *samba-enredo*, a music genre that (according to many Brazilians) carries Afro-Brazilian spiritual force?

My proposition to employ the term Evangelical syncretization as a heuristic device to unravel how Evangelicals legitimated the use of *samba-enredo* considers the critique that the term *syncretism* has received over the years. Among the proponents, Melville Herskovits (1937), among the many proponents of the concept, used it to analyze Afro-American cultural forms and practices in the New World (Apter 1991; Burke 2009; Stewart 1999). Syncretism became one of the prominent concepts employed by anthropologists to theorize the mixtures of religious representations and practices from different cultural traditions (Bastide 1978; Ferretti 1995; Leopold and Jensen 2004).[4] Within cultural anthropology, religious studies and theology, the concept of syncretism received much criticism, as Charles Stewart (1999) has described extensively. Nevertheless, I suggest that debates about syncretism help us to unravel the fusions between Pentecostalism and Afro-Brazilian aesthetic forms and practices.

In their reflections, Stewart and Shaw (1994, 6) pointed out that we should not merely focus on fusions but also on fissures and we should specifically pay attention to "antisyncretism": "The antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defense of religious boundaries." In general, their concern was to describe the power struggles that are related to cultural encounters and the possible agency of actors involved. Stewart (1999, 58) later argued that syncretism "is usually accompanied by a parallel discourse that might be termed metasyncretic: the commentary and registered perceptions of actors as to whether amalgamation has occurred and whether this is good or bad."

Stewart and Shaw did not confront a fundamental point that concerns the metasyncretic discourses at the heart of this article. They recognized that particular cultural phenomena could alternately be labeled "cultural" or "religious" during the course of history and that such labeling matters to actors' assessments if

things should mix or not. Nevertheless, they did not include the actors' debates about these labels in their model of syncretism/antisyncretism. This is unfortunate because what is considered "religious" and what is considered "cultural" in a given society does not necessarily change over long periods of time—as Stewart and Shaw implied—but can also be a point of contestation between groups at the moment that fusion (or resistance) takes place (see also Reinhardt 2018). As I argue, actors' metasyncretic discourses and perceptions whether amalgamations are good or bad also involve the questions if they identify something as "religious" or as "cultural" and if religious leaders authorize such an identification.

Here, it is important to distinguish between the analytic, anthropological use of the terms *religion* and *culture* on the one hand and their reifying usage beyond social scientific discussions on the other. When writing "culture" in this article, I mean the reifying term that social actors employ to picture a distinct (and unchanging) way of life of a particular ethnic or national community (Baumann 1996). State institutions and social actors regularly employ the terms *religion* and *culture* to try and set apart practices and traditions, to assign them to particular groups, and to describe them as static and unchanging in an attempt to define their relation to the state, to society, and to each other (Kapferer 1988).

Major questions emerge: How can "religious" and "cultural" phenomena move from one category to the other, and what is at stake for different groups when do they do? I argue that one of the markers that social actors employ to distinguish between "religious" and "cultural" practices, rituals, and objects is the extent to which they are perceived to produce awe. In conversation with the influential writings of R. R. Marret (1929), Birgit Meyer (2009, 2016) has sought to unravel the reproduction of religious thought, practice, and community at the intersections of form, embodiment, and power. As she argues, the experience of awe (the "wow" effect), does not lie entirely in objects or practices themselves but is the result of religious regimes that "offer authorized modes and means to experience the divine" (2016, 9). Moreover, the sacred status of an object or a practice can and is often contested, as are the authorizations of the modes and means that produce awe (Meyer and de Witte 2013; Port and Meyer 2018). Meyer's discussion of awe accords with Webb Keane's (2007) work on semiotic ideologies. Building on the notion of linguistic ideology (Silverstein 1979), Keane argues that distinctive sociocultural notions circulate about the communicative potential of signs, objects, and gestures (see also Bialecki and Pinal 2011).

Drawing on the works mentioned, I argue that these authorizations influence what is considered "cultural" and what is considered "religious" and, vice versa, that the authorized divine status of objects and practices influences metasyncretic discourse. The denial of the sacred *essence* of carnaval practices allows particular Evangelical groups to propose an alternative semiotic ideology. By codifying carnaval objects and practices as unambiguously "cultural," these Pentecostal actors

discursively enforce the possibility to include them in Evangelical performances and codify them as potential transmitters of the Holy Spirit.

This Evangelical syncretization, I argue, involves what Giorgio Agamben calls profanation. According to Agamben, profanation differs from secularization in that the latter "leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. . . Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use" (2007, 77). Whereas one might argue that the objects and practices at the heart of this article never lose their spiritual force for some, the point is that this force is entirely different for Evangelical participants of carnaval: it is Christian and benevolent instead of malevolent. Furthermore, according to them, the objects and practices do not *intrinsically* contain force. Evangelical actors mobilize theological-semiotic arguments to claim that objects and practices that others deem spiritually powerful should be considered unambiguously "cultural" and can therefore be used for their parades.

Before exemplifying how this works in relation to *samba-enredo*, I depict the history and context of the religio-cultural fusions of carnaval. This should clarify why many of the carnaval practices that are described as "cultural" are thought to contain spiritual force and also explain why Evangelicals can argue that they do not.

Carnaval, "Culture," and "Religion"

Parading is one of the quintessential elements of Brazilian carnaval (DaMatta 1991). Notwithstanding the regional particularities, many parades are fueled by the thunderous sound of *samba-enredo*, a style of samba music that is defined by collective singing, accompanied by the sound of a *cavaquinho* (string instrument) and a large percussion band (*bateria*) (Cavalcanti 2015). Several large Brazilian cities harbor so-called *sambódromos*: arenas that host competitions between samba schools (*escolas de samba*). The first samba schools arose in Rio de Janeiro in the 1920s, after which they gradually became seen as the principal carnaval institutes of Brazil. During the competitions, samba schools march through the *sambódromo*. The parades of the large and best-known samba schools in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are broadcast live by the popular television channel TV Globo. Besides the *sambódromo* parades, carnaval also offers many *blocos* throughout Brazil, which generally do not enter in formal competition but attract crowds that enjoy the parades as they move through the city.

Carnaval parades display mixtures of different religious and cultural traditions reflecting the Brazilian history of Baroque Christianity and indigenous and African devotional practices (Cavalcanti 2015; Montes 1998, 2001). Scholarly writings on Brazilian carnaval are heavily influenced by the work of Roberto DaMatta (1991),

who described carnaval as a space of *communitas* (Turner 1983) and as a ritual that allows for the inversion of social roles and a temporal dissolution of hierarchies. The appearance of Evangelical *blocos* in the streets of Brazilian cities exemplifies DaMatta's statement: "In the Brazilian Carnaval there is room for all beings, types personages, categories, groups, and values" (1991, 42). However, this article focuses not so much on the ritual time-space of the carnaval but on the discussions about the "roots" of carnaval traditions.

Demarcations between terms like *religion* and *culture* have a long and influential history in Brazil. As a number of Brazilian scholars (Birman and Leite 2000; Burity 2011; Giumbelli 2014; Montero 2015) have shown, the categories *religião* (religion) and *laicidade* (secularity) played decisive roles in the restructuring of the governmental roles of the state and the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil. Though the modern Brazilian state is constitutionally secular, Catholicism was and is tightly interwoven with Brazilian nationalist representations and its governmental institutions (schools, hospitals, etc.). At the birth of the Brazilian Republic in 1889, when the political separation of church and state was introduced, the Brazilian Catholic Church strategically conformed with the demands of the Brazilian state-in-transformation so that it could define itself as a flexible partner in several of the governmental projects.

During this shift, Afro-Brazilian religious practices were presented as backward "customs" instead of "religious" practices, which barred the legal protection of such practices according to the new legislation. Furthermore, despite the liberal constitution of the late nineteenth century, dominant identifications of Afro-Brazilian practices as *feitiçaria* (sorcery) also denied these practices the protection the law should have granted them (Giumbelli 2014), while leaving intact the notion that they contain spiritual force.

Governmental changes at the turn of the twentieth century enforced the description of "customs" of urban, black populations as typical of Brazilian national culture (Fry 1982; Montes 1998; Oliven 1984; Sansi 2007; Vianna 1999). As a result, carnaval parades are commonly represented as defining cultural practices of Brazil (Cavalcanti 2015; DaMatta 1991; Pravaz 2008a, 2008b; Sheriff 1999; Menezes and Bártolo 2019). Such representations are characterized by racial politics and class struggles. As Robin Sheriff (1999, 14) has put it: "It was particularly during and after the 1930s that samba and the carioca carnaval became simultaneously identified both with images of an authenticating 'blackness' (or even 'Africanness') and with those of the uniquely hybrid, 'mixed' national culture of Brazil."[5]

While carnaval is commonly depicted as "cultural," this depiction allows for the ongoing production and authorization of religious experiences and representations. Carnaval is generally not described as Catholic or religious in its totality, yet carnaval celebrations are incorporated in a Roman Catholic (liturgical) calendar that is central to the organization of Brazilian public life. In annual fashion,

carnaval takes place during the four days before Lent, which—in the Roman Catholic liturgy—is a forty-day period of abstinence that begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Easter Sunday.

Beyond calendrical encompassment, Catholic saints regularly appear at the center of carnaval parades (Bártolo 2018; Menezes and Bártolo 2019; Montes 1998), although this is not wholeheartedly supported by the Roman Catholic Church. Since the 1940s, the Roman Catholic Church has aimed to strictly regulate the devotion of saints during public celebrations and it regularly critiques the appearance of saintly figures in "worldly" surroundings. This has not eradicated the appearance of saints but has widened the gap between popular religiosity and the Roman Catholic Church (Montes 1998).

Besides Roman Catholic encompassment and oversight, Brazilian carnaval is entangled with Afro-Brazilian religious practices and traditions (Cavalcanti 2015; Godi 1997, Montes 1998). As Roberto Moura (1995) describes, by the end of the nineteenth century, black residents of Rio de Janeiro formed Afro-Brazilian carnaval processions called *cucumbis*, and many participated in so-called *ranchos*, that is, processions that display fusions between Euro-Brazilian and Afro-Brazilian styles (Brasil 2014). Elements of these processions were later incorporated by the well-known samba schools. Since the 1960s, samba schools in Rio de Janeiro explicitly emphasize the presence and history of enslaved African people in Brazil, and carnaval parades are commonly seen as stylized performances that preserve Afro-Brazilian religious practices. Such an understanding is strengthened by the fact that adherents of Afro-Brazilian religious groups commonly hold that *samba-enredo* carries intrinsic spiritual power because the rhythm and sound of the *tambores* (drums) produce the spiritual energy (*axé*) that stands at the heart of Afro-Brazilian cosmology and practice (Araújo and Dupret 2012; Browning 1995; Capone 2019). For example, in their analysis of the parades of smaller samba schools during the Rio de Janeiro carnaval of 2011 and 2012, José Geraldo da Rocha and Cristina da Conceição Silva state: "The drums, the rhythms, the dances are fundamental elements of Afro-Brazilian culture. These elements mix with others in the formation of the samba school parades of the carioca carnaval. This turns the presence of *Orixás* [Afro-Brazilian spiritual entities] during the samba school performances into something expected" (2013, 58).

The common understanding that *samba-enredo* is cultural *and* full of spiritual force is strengthened by governmental interventions. In 2007, the National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN)—a branch of the ministry of culture of the Brazilian federal government—placed (the roots of) *samba de terreiro* and *samba-enredo* on their list of Registered Cultural Goods that are part of Brazil's Intangible Cultural Heritage. The dossier that explains the relation between *samba-enredo* and culture (Dossiê das Matrizes do Samba no Rio de Janeiro: partido-alto samba de terreiro samba-enredo) opens with the following words: "The objective

of the current work is to unite theoretical texts and documents that demonstrate the importance of the roots of samba in Rio de Janeiro for Brazilian culture (*cultura brasileira*)."[6] The section that analyzes the religiosity of the genre describes samba as "inseparable" from religion, yet mentions only Catholic and Afro-Brazilian religious actors and practices, reproducing a common understanding that samba and Evangelical Christianity are at odds with one another (see also Oosterbaan 2017). Likewise, in 2008, the Samba de Roda of the Recôncavo of Bahia (region in the North-East) was placed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.[7] How do Brazilian Evangelical movements fit in and relate to this configuration of samba, national heritage, and transcendent forces? How can some argue it is both cultural and spiritually neutral? First, I describe why the majority of Brazilian Evangelical groups shied away from the use of "culture" in the past. Later, I argue how several Evangelical actors have started to employ it with regard to samba and carnaval.

Evangelical Expansion and "Brazilian Culture"

Though Brazil is commonly portrayed as a Roman Catholic country, the number of Roman Catholic adherents has declined steadily during the past thirty years, and more and more people have started to congregate in Evangelical churches. The globally operating IURD especially stands out as the forerunner of the churches that have become very visible in Brazil. Nevertheless, other Evangelical churches have also gained much attention, and new churches such as BdN also attract many followers.

The collection of Evangelical denominations in Brazil is very diverse and includes, among others, Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal, and reformed Protestant churches. Nevertheless, many of these denominations, if not all, place importance on the individual acceptance of Jesus as Savior and tend to describe the world in terms of a fundamental opposition between God and the devil, who are engaged in a spiritual battle. While I recognize that there are important differences between some of the denominations that produce carnaval gospel, the point of this article is to show that Evangelical churches with varying doctrinal backgrounds engage in it. Before showing how, it is important to elucidate some of the principal obstacles that many of the churches face, when they want to produce carnaval gospel.

Despite this growing public presence of Evangelical churches, Evangelical actors by and large did not seek to align with or express their practices in terms of Brazilian culture. In the words of Emerson Giumbelli: "In the case of the *evangélicos*, their presence in Brazilian society does not assume the form of a 'national culture' or an 'ethnic culture.' It is very evident that *evangélicos* do not aspire to become present by claiming a piece of the nation, they do not merge with any of the vectors commonly considered constituents of the Brazilian people" (Giumbelli 2013, 194).

Evangelicals have described many elements of Brazilian life as spiritually harmful. Afro-Brazilian religious worship and popular cultural expressions related to Afro-Brazilian life in particular are heavily demonized (Silva 2007). Such a demonization stands in striking contrast to movements that seek to define Afro-Brazilian practices and material culture as patrimonial heritage (Collins 2015; Giumbelli 2014; Silva 2014).

Clara Mafra (2011b) has proposed a convincing reason as to why Evangelical institutions have been less successful in presenting Evangelical Christianity as part of authenticated Brazilian culture than Roman Catholic Church and Afro-Brazilian institutions and actors, which have successfully managed to employ the culture concept as a weapon (*arma*) to legitimize their territorial and material presence and embed themselves in patrimonial representations. According to Mafra, one of the major obstacles is that a number of Evangelical churches have presented themselves as iconoclastic (Protestant) forces that cast in doubt the sacredness of material culture. It is difficult to unite this tradition of suspicion vis-à-vis material cultural with current processes that attempt to confirm and redefine national "Brazilian culture" as rooted in Afro-Brazilian cultural-religious cosmology and practice (Giumbelli 2014; Silva 2014).

While I agree with Mafra's analysis of the obstacles that Evangelicals face in appropriating a patrimonial discourse along the axes of "culture" and "tradition," I argue that we are currently witnessing a change. Evangelical groups are not only pushing their own stylized aesthetic performances as additions to the patrimonial canon of authenticated Brazilian culture (Sant'Ana 2013), they are also adopting Brazilian cultural performances that are part of this patrimonial canon. Across Brazil, Evangelical groups have altered their oppositional stance vis-à-vis musical genres that were formerly described as threatening or even demonic, including forms hitherto associated with Afro-Brazilian religious life. Nevertheless, these religio-cultural fusions confront Evangelical groups with the question of how to deal with the common understanding that some of these music genres carry intrinsic spiritual power (*axé*) and/or summon the presence of Orixás. To demonstrate how they resolve this, the following two sections describe Evangelical practices related to two samba-genres: *pagode* and *samba-enredo*.

Samba Gospel

Pagode is a subgenre of samba music. It displays many similarities with the *samba-enredo* of the carnaval parades, but contains a smaller rhythm section and generally exhibits a slower tempo. *Pagode* is one of the music genres that in the recent past was seen as worldly and unfit for the hymns that were sung in most Evangelical churches; nowadays, it can be heard in churches throughout Brazil (Fajardo 2015).

Figure 1 *Wagner Dias (Waguinho) performing* samba gospel *in the Pentecostal Church Assembleia de Deus dos Últimos Dias (Assemblies of God of the Last Days). Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, March 1st, 2011, Rio de Janeiro.*

In contemporary Rio de Janeiro, there are several groups that perform *samba gospel* (also known as gospel *pagode*).[8]

One noteworthy Rio de Janeiro musician who started to make samba gospel is Wagner Dias (see Figure 1). The artist, known as Waguinho, used to be part of the "worldly" band called Os Morenos.[9] After accepting Jesus, Waguinho became a member of the Pentecostal Church Assembléia de Deus dos Últimos Dias (Assemblies of God of the Last Days) and started to perform samba gospel.[10] In an interview labeled "testimony," Waguinho explained that many Evangelicals warned him not to play samba in Evangelical churches because many adherents associate it with the devil. In response, Waguinho argued that it is not the (samba) rhythm that defines the character of a song but the life one lives: "I live to worship God and to do the work of God and people recognize that."[11]

Besides Waguinho, who had a career as *pagodeiro* before his conversion, there are also Evangelical musicians who made a career after their conversion. During fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro in 2011, I interviewed Jorjão Borges, the lead singer of the Evangelical band Labareda de Fogo (Flame of Fire). I had heard Pentecostal musicians playing the *pandeiro* (Brazilian tambourine used in *pagode*) before, but unlike those musicians, Jorjão and his group were using all the common *pagode* percussion instruments in their church performances (see Figure 2). As Jorjão told

Figure 2 *Jorjoão and his* samba gospel *band Labareda de Fogo (Flame of Fire) performing in an Assembleia de Deus congregation in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro. Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, March 30, 2011, Rio de Janeiro.*

me during the interview, when he formed the group in 2005 they started to perform the kind of *pagode* that resembled the musical style of "worldly" groups. They encountered considerable resistance when they showed up at churches with their instruments; however, when pastors started to authorize their performances, even the adherents of Pentecostal churches that had been hesitant liked it a lot. When I asked how that was possible, Jorjão replied: "Pagode is practically in the blood of all Brazilians, isn't it?" "The rhythm is ours, it is God who created it." The producer of the band, who had entered during our interview, underlined Jorjão's position by stating loudly: "There is no sin in the rhythm!" The words of these musicians confirm John Burdick's (2013) findings. He showed that Evangelical samba groups in São Paulo stress the fact that samba is a national musical genre that pertains to *all* Brazilians and thus also to Evangelicals.

One of the clearest examples that demonstrates how Evangelical groups face the entanglement between samba, Brazilian nationalism, and Afro-Brazilian traditions is the book *Ser Evangélico Sem Deixar de Ser Brasileiro* (*To Be Evangelical and Remain Brazilian*), by musician and pastor Gerson Borges (2016). In a YouTube video, Borges explains that his book means to engage with Brazilian intellectuals and artists who heavily resist *Evangelicalismo*.[12] As the title also suggests, Borges tries to convince his audience that there is no opposition between *Evangelicalismo*

and Brazilian culture. He simultaneously aims his arrows at those Brazilian intellectuals who tend to describe Evangelical practices as alien to Brazilian culture and at Evangelicals who describe samba as non-Christian. Moreover, he makes this point with a samba song titled: "*Dizem que sambar é pecado* (They say that to samba is a sin)," with the following lyrics:

Dizem que sambar é pecado
Dizem que sambar não é bom, não é bom
Eu acho isso um tanto equivocado
Eu acho isso um tanto equivocado

Pra deixarmos meio mofado
Na gaveta fria de uma opinião
Que deixa tanta alegria de lado
Deveria ser dado a ele mesmo, em adoração

Dizem que o samba é coisa de pagão
Discordo – é do Senhor toda a criação
E apuro para ele o meu batuque
E afino com mãos santas meu violão

Dizem que sambar é do preto
Que sofreu escravo, nesse chão, nesse chão
É isso mesmo, mas recuso o gueto:
O samba não tem pele, nem tem raça
É do coração

Mesmo eu sendo um crente mulato
Acho que o branco há de ter inspiração
Numa liturgia feita em dois por quatro
Brasileira oferta ao Deus de todos

They say that to samba is a sin.
They say that to samba isn't good, isn't good,
I think it is a mistake
When the beloved Creator has given us this talent.

To let it turn moldy
in the cool drawer because of an opinion
that turns aside so much joy
it should be given to Him in adoration.

They say that samba is for the pagans.
I disagree, all Creation is of the Lord,

I improve my beat for him
and tune my guitar with sacred hands.

They say that samba is for Black people,
that suffered as slaves, in this land, in this land.
While this is true, I won't accept a ghetto,
samba neither has skin nor race
it comes from the heart.

Even though I am an Evangelical mulatto
I think a white person should be inspired
by a liturgy set in two four time
Brazilians offer to the God of all people.[13]

Borges' samba lyrics exemplify his efforts to uncouple the musical practice of samba (and *pagode*) from its *strict* association to black Brazilians and his efforts to convince his audience that samba is not *essentially* Afro-Brazilian, characterized by a pre-Evangelical Brazilian past. While he recognizes the suffering caused by slavery, his lyrics echo the pervasive myth of racial democracy (Pravaz 2008a) that describes Brazilian society as a harmonious blend of races (Freyre 1946) that downplays the profound connections between slavery, racism, and socioeconomic inequality in Brazil. To state that "samba neither has skin nor race" heightens the risk of negating the embodied history of Afro-Brazilian cultural practices (samba) in the face of slavery (Browning 1995).

Whereas Borges's performative intervention might be considered more distant from the carnaval performances in the streets of Brazil, samba gospel performances are closely linked to Evangelical carnaval because *pagode* and *samba-enredo* are commonly described as having the same Afro-Brazilian religio-cultural roots. In addition, Evangelical artists are part of a national network of musicians that connects gospel samba performances to carnaval celebrations, exemplified by Waguinho's appearance at the carnaval of Salvador da Bahia in 2016 and 2017.

Carnaval Gospel

The appearance of Evangelical *blocos* in Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo marks the rise of carnaval gospel in Brazil. The front-runners of this rise can be found in Rio de Janeiro, where two Evangelical churches have been taking part in the street carnaval for the past three decades: CEIZS with their *bloco* Mocidade Dependente de Deus (God-Dependent Youth) and PVN with their *bloco* Cara de Leão (Lion's Face) (see video 1). The video fragment of the Cara de Leão parade, recorded on March 4, 2014, exhibits the rhythm section (*bateria*) of the *bloco*, ready to continue its march through Rio Branco Avenue in Rio de Janeiro. Immediately

Figure 3 *Parade of the* bloco *Cara de Leão at the Avenida Rio Branco in Rio de Janeiro in 2014. Photo: Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, March 4, 2014, Rio de Janeiro.*

behind the *bateria* stands the *carro de som* (a truck with loudspeakers), that carries the samba singer, the cavaquinho player, and church leaders. The *bateria*, which consist primarily of adolescent church members, produces typical *samba-enredo* music as boys and girls hit their *surdos* (bass drums) and *tamborins* (small frame drums) in synchronous fashion.

Both churches—PVN and CEIZS—held their first *blocos* at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s. Since then, they have become widely known as the two Evangelical churches in the city that parade during carnaval.[14] The doctrinal background of these two churches differs considerably, and they attract a different set of members. PVN leaders emphasize demonic presence more than those of the CEIZS, and the ideology and practice of the former are closer to those of the "classic" Pentecostal churches such as the Assembleia de Deus (Assemblies of God). Nevertheless, the form and message of both *blocos* are similar. They both organize street parades with a large group of *samba-enredo* percussionists. Members of both *blocos* stress it is only with Jesus that happiness extends beyond the four days of carnaval (see Figures 3 and 4).

Cara de Leão members that I interviewed claimed that the *samba-enredo* rhythm that one hears at the "worldly" *blocos* and *sambódromo* parades contains no

Figure 4 *The* bateria *(*samba-enredo *percussion section) of the* bloco *Cara de Leão at the Avenida Rio Branco in Rio de Janeiro in 2014. Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, March 4, 2014, Rio de Janeiro.*

intrinsic evil force. These statements accord with the interviews I held with other PVN congregants, who stated that no music genre is inherently demonic, but the devil stole certain genres to abuse them. Other Evangelical *samba-enredo* performers in Rio de Janeiro share this theological/ontological position. Pastor Xandão (Alexandre Ramos), a member of the group Sambistas de Cristo (Christ's Samba Players), explains in his book on the theology of Sambistas de Cristo: "Everything the devil stole from us will return to our hands, up to the rhythms" (Ramos 2015, 16).

Not long after the rise of Evangelical *blocos* in Rio de Janeiro, other Evangelical churches in the country started to mount their own *blocos*. Since the year 2000, the Igreja Batista Missionária da Independência (Independence Missionary Baptist Church) has organized a string of events: Impacto de Carnaval (Carnaval Impact) in Salvador da Bahia, which includes, among other things, a parade of their *bloco* Sal da Terra (with *atabaque* percussion instruments) through the historical center of Salvador (*Pelourinho*), and an event at the *Praça da Sé* that hosts gospel celebrities. Sal da Terra is headed by Valdemiro Santos, former member of the famous Afro-Brazilian percussion ensemble Olodum. Recordings of the events and interviews with representatives show that the church annually invites Brazilian gospel

Figure 5 *Snare drums and an* agogô *(percussion bells) of the Batucada Abençoada (Blessed Beats). Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, July 8, 2018, São Paulo.*

artists from other cities. In 2015, for example, they invited Batucada Abençoada (which was still called *Bateria de Neve* at the time).[15]

Since 2015, BdN has substantially expanded its Evangelical carnaval activities. In 2017, it renamed its carnaval percussion ensemble and started to call it Batucada Abençoada. In 2018, Rafael, the local leader of the Batucada Abençoada in São Paulo, told me that members decided their *bloco* needed a "cool" name. Strikingly, just like Cara de Leão, BdN also opted for the figure of a lion as the logo of the *bloco* (see Figures 5 and 6). BdN's effort to be "cool" reflects the church's attempts to attract a youthful audience, which might have the idea that becoming part of an Evangelical community cuts them off from their social environment of peers. In general, BdN has stylized its churches in such a way that a perceived gap between

Figure 6 Mestre-sala *(master of ceremony) and* porta-bandeira *(flag carrier) holding the flag with the logo of the* bloco *Cara de Leão at the Avenida Rio Branco in Rio de Janeiro in 2014. Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, March 4, 2014, Rio de Janeiro.*

living a Christian life and being part of contemporary youth culture is bridged as much as possible. The altars of BdN churches are surfboards, for example.

The Batucada Abençoada exceeds the local organization and performance of *blocos* of other Evangelical churches, as branches of the BdN practice the same samba (rhythm and lyrics) independently in different cities throughout Brazil to perform collectively in one particular place during carnaval. During the carnaval of 2018, the Batucada Abençoada united 700 trained percussionists from across the country to perform at the beaches of Rio de Janeiro; in 2019, they united 1,010 percussionists and broke the Guinness World Record for biggest samba percussion band performance.[16]

Strikingly, members of all the mentioned churches employ the notion of “culture” to explain their involvement with carnaval. In a televised interview during the carnaval of 2017, Thais Croitor, communications manager of BdN explained: “We believe that the diversity of musical styles and the vastness of musical culture helps us to accomplish our mission . . . to preach the gospel to everyone.”[17] Likewise, pastor Ubirajara Gomes, leader of IBMI and creator of Sal da Terra, emphasizes the church’s engagement with “Bahian culture.” When asked how he explains the employment of “Bahian cultural expressions” (*expressões culturais baianas*) as part of the evangelization practices of the church, pastor Ubirajara Gomes responded:

"I am certain this does not contradict the Bible. Every population (*povo*) has its own culture and the church has to use the adequate strategy that helps people to understand the gospel."[18]

Some congregants extend the argument to perform samba music during carnaval. In a 2018 interview in São Paulo, Cristina, a Batucada Abençoada participant, expressed the necessity to perform Evangelical *samba-enredo* in terms of "cultural preservation" vis-à-vis global pop culture: "It is very important to protect the roots (*raizes*) of Brazilian culture. Samba emerged during colonialism and is part of Brazilianness (*Brasilidade*). There is so much musical influence from the United States. We need to rescue (*resgatar*) samba."

Beyond the use of *tambores*, there are also other commonalities between the Evangelical *blocos* in various Brazilian cities. For example, the *blocos* of Cara de Leão and Batucada Abençoada are symbolically led by a *mestre-sala* (master of ceremony) and *porta-bandeira* (flag carrier). These figures form a couple, dressed in costume, that dances in front of the percussion section of the parade (see Figure 6). One encounters such a couple in many *sambódromo* and street carnaval parades throughout the country; its presence is one of the markers of a "genuine" carnaval parade.

Clothing provides another example. The musicians of Sal da Terra and Batucada Abençoada are clothed in so-called *abadás*. An *abadá* a is a sleeveless shirt that has a Yoruba origin and is used by many *blocos* throughout Brazil; however, the Evangelical *blocos* call these shirts *aba Deus* (see Figures 7 and 8). *Aba* could be translated as a piece of clothing that covers and protects—something like an apron—and *Deus* means God. Playfully transforming *abadás* into *aba Deus*—a cover of God—not only means employing carnaval traditions for Evangelical use but also erasing the distinctively Afro-Brazilian background of the clothing. This stands in sharp contrast to the efforts of societal groups to emphasize the Afro-Brazilian elements of carnaval, observable in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador (Armstrong 2010; Selka 2016).

Drums and Contestations

In general, the playful but serious conversion of *abadás* into *aba Deus* marks the Evangelical attempt to employ styles common to Brazilian carnaval of (see also Mesquita 2012). Such alterations also serve as powerful responses to non-Evangelicals (who state that all Evangelicals want to end carnaval) and to Evangelicals (who believe that it is spiritually harmful to take part in it). On the YouTube channel of BdN, a representative of Batucada Abençoada states: "The objective is not to end carnaval but to transform it into the biggest party in adoration of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. It is fantastic to be able to bring the samba for Christ to places that are known for their carnaval throughout the world."[19]

Figure 7 *The front side of the* abadá *(sleeveless carnaval shirt) worn by* Sal da Terra *participants during the carnaval of Salvador da Bahia in 2016. Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, March 24, 2020, Amsterdam.*

This statement echoes the words of several Cara de Leão participants, who told me that their objections against sinful behavior (adultery, substance-abuse, aggression) are not aimed at ending carnaval but at transforming it from within. These statements respond to some of the negative comments of non-Evangelical Brazilians about Evangelical parades *and* to the dismissive reactions of followers of other Evangelical churches who claim that the churches who organize Evangelical *blocos* allow their flocks to participate in "worldly" activities.[20]

According to the members of the CEIZS, PVN, IBMI, and BdN, they are not participating in the carnaval festivities of the nonconverted. They claim that they are using the aesthetic forms to evangelize as an *estrátegia* to attract and convert people at those places and moments that are most perilous. Cara de Leão members regularly asserted that their parade is *estratégia*. For example, João, a PVN member, stated: "The church has this *estratégia* to use our culture to transmit the Evangelical message to the people present at the Rio Branco [avenue in Rio de Janeiro]."

Figure 8 *The back side of the* abadá *(sleeveless carnaval shirt) worn by* Sal da Terra *participants during the carnaval of Salvador da Bahia in 2016. Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, March 24, 2020, Amsterdam.*

João's reference to Brazilian "culture" allows a rapprochement between Evangelical styles and the patrimonial canon, while simultaneously refuting the accusations that Cara de Leão members are "hypocrites" who want to indulge in sinful festivities while claiming they are genuine born-again Christians.

Evangelical oppositions against carnaval gospel also relate to a deep-felt understanding that the drums of carnaval are associated with *feitiçaria* (sorcery).[21] For many Evangelical adherents, it is not merely the question of whether they should be on the streets at a time of intense moral laxity but also the question of whether one should participate in the production of music that is understood to be spiritually hazardous. In response, the Evangelicals who take part in carnaval gospel present a semiotic ideology (Keane 2007) that claims that samba does not carry intrinsic spiritual power and is therefore not perilous. According to the carnaval gospel adherents, lyrics define the status of the music, not the form (genre) or the instruments. It is thus possible to use *samba-enredo* to proselytize as long as the

Figure 9 *Back side of the* abadá *(sleeveless carnaval shirt) of a member of the Batucada Abençoada (Blessed Beats), depicting an armed angel beating the* surdo *(type of drum). Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, July 8, 2018, São Paulo.*

samba lyrics are Christian. Moreover, according to the participants, the Christian lyrics allow the *samba-enredo* to activate and transmit the powers of the Holy Spirit.

When I asked a PVN congregant what it meant to be part of the *bateria* of Cara de Leão, she replied: "I can say something about the spiritual aspect. The fact to be there as part of the *bateria*—we learn that everything that is blessed by God has meaning. So, I think, no I am certain, that with every beat (*batuque*) of the *bateria* we are breaking chains. . . . Singing or playing, I know that I am an instrument of God and that is what makes me want to continue to play." Another PVN congregant confirmed her words: "This drum (*tambor*) certainly produces something spiritually powerful" (Oosterbaan 2017). While one might claim that the last statement exemplifies the continuing belief in the power of drums to produce

spiritual force (*axé*), the semiotic ideology of carnaval gospel practitioners is different from that of many non-Evangelical carnaval groups and Pentecostal movements, who hold that samba inherently contains (traces of) Afro-Brazilian spiritual force. According to the carnaval gospel practitioners, drums produce (Holy) spiritual force only because Christian lyrics accompany the *samba-enredo* and this force can only be sustained when practitioners are born-again Christians who live piously. The drawings on the *abadás* of other Evangelical *blocos*, which highlight the spiritual power of the drums (see Figures 8 and 9), should also be understood in this light.

Conclusion

The rise of carnaval gospel demonstrates that Evangelical groups in different parts of the country have started to use the genres, practices, and materials commonly associated with Brazilian carnaval, some of which are closely associated with Afro-Brazilian religious life. These mergers are highly innovative because many Evangelical churches have vehemently opposed Afro-Brazilian practices. Evangelical churches that did incorporate Afro-Brazilian religious symbols and materials in the past, have done so by picturing them as demonic forces that could only be eradicated by means of the Holy Spirit. Birman and Leite (2000) have described this type of translation (Meyer 1998) and incorporation *syncretic Pentecostalism*. The performance of the Blessed Beats percussion ensemble—and the performances of the other Evangelical *blocos* I studied—contain fusions of Evangelical and Afro-Brazilian aesthetics, yet the mergers do not follow the patterns described with the term syncretic Pentecostalism and the particular Afro-Brazilian elements are not demonized.

This pushes the question how to understand these new fusions to the forefront. In this article, I have argued that this new kind of merger could best be described as evangelical syncretization that leans on a process termed religious profanation. To explain the merits of these terms, I revisited anthropological discussions on syncretism and antisyncretism, which highlight the importance of metasyncritic discourses that contain the reified categories "culture" and "religion" (Stewart 1999). My description and analysis of samba gospel and Evangelical carnaval show that the metasyncretic discourses that support or oppose fusions of Evangelical and Afro-Brazilian aesthetics include debates about whether particular practices should be defined as "cultural" or as "religious." What is at stake in these debates for the people involved is the question if the spiritual forces are intrinsic parts of carnaval practices or not. Picturing Afro-Brazilian carnaval practices as "cultural" creates space for the metasyncritic argument that these elements hold no demonic spiritual power and can thus become part of Evangelical parades.

Bruno Reinhardt (2018) has offered a similar analysis with regard to the Bahian food called acarajé, fried dough that is considered typically Afro-Brazilian and closely entangled with Candomblé. As Reinhardt observes, acarajé is generally typified as “ethnic” and/or “religious” food. Its perceived religiosity is generally tied to the idea that acarajé contains *axé*, leaving room for the argument that there is also an *axé*-less, ethnic variant of acarajé. Defining *samba-enredo* and *pagode* as “cultural” allows samba-producing Evangelicals to support the claim that these styles of samba do not inherently contain spiritual force, despite their connections to an African past. In preparation for the carnaval of 2019, even Silas Malafaia created an Evangelical samba school to proselytize during carnaval, claiming “rhythms are neither owned by God nor by the devil. It depends on who uses them.”[22]

Evangelical *blocos* make use of an evangelization technique they call *estratégia*, which rhetorically states that Evangelicals can venture into the domains that are contaminated by the devil. In combination, Evangelical performers and audiences propose an alternative semiotic ideology (Keane 2007) that states that all music belongs to God and no music genre is intrinsically malevolent. I argue that this proposition entails what Agamben (2007) described as profanation: the neutralization of that which was thought to contain force. This does not mean that this neutralization is stable or uncontested. Not all Evangelical groups have changed their position vis-à-vis those aesthetic forms that are considered spiritually hazardous, and many Evangelicals do not wholeheartedly embrace this particular semiotic ideology.

Historically, Brazilian Evangelical churches found it hard to employ the “weapon of culture” (Mafra 2011b), in contrast to Afro-Brazilian religious movements and Roman Catholic organizations (Sansi 2007). However, the appearance of Evangelical *blocos* throughout Brazil indicates that certain Evangelical groups are less hesitant to employ recognized patrimonial aesthetic forms and their reluctance to employ the term *culture* to legitimize this. Yet Evangelical carnaval parades and *samba-enredo* performances also display exclusionary arrangements. The tendency to erase the explicit Afro-Brazilian traces of the parades—specifically when they are labeled as “religious”—presents the danger of severing the links between cultural expressions and lived histories of Afro-Brazilian populations throughout Brazil.[23] The question remains whether these fusions will be accepted among a broader group of Evangelicals throughout Brazil. Only time will tell.

Notes

[1] An early version of this article was presented at the international workshop "Power, Politics,and Religion in Brazil: Ruptures, Continuities, and Crisis" organized by Dr. Maya Mayblin (University of Edinburgh). I want to thank the organizer and the participants for their invaluable comments. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor of this journal for their help in revising the article. Last but not least, many thanks to the Brazilian participants of my research on Evangelical carnival.

[2]When writing about Evangelical movements in Brazil, I refer to the cluster of Pentecostal, Protestant Charismatic, and Born-Again Christian groups. For the last decade or so, the common Brazilian Portuguese term to denote the people of this cluster is os evangélicos (the Evangelicals). The Brazilian census of 2010 showed that 22 percent of the population described itself as evangélico (Evangelical) and that the majority of Brazil's 42.3 million evangélicos can be identified as Pentecostal (on a population of approximately 190 million).

[3]All translations in this article are mine.

[4]In the context of Brazil and the discussions about Brazilian cultural transformations, Roger Bastide (1978, 2004) has occupied a central role in the development of thought about syncretism (Goldman 2015). Bastide was convinced that encounters should be studied in their historical contexts to understand the dynamics of fusion, fission, and juxtaposition (Despland 2014). Nevertheless, as both Sérgio Ferretti (1995) and Stefania Capone (2007) argue, he incorporated a number of prevalent dichotomies in his models (purity-degeneration, continuity-discontinuity).

[5]Many people have eloquently described the complex articulations between popular and elite cultures in particular periods of the nation building project (Cavalcanti 2015; Schwarcz and Starling 2018; Vianna 1999).

[6]See http://portal.iphan.gov.br/pagina/detalhes/64.

[7]See https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/samba-de-roda-of-the-reconcavo-of-bahia-00101.

[8]Commonly, when one encounters the labels *gospel samba* or *samba gospel* in Evangelical contexts, the music style is *pagode* instead of *samba-enredo*.

[9]*Moreno* means brown-skinned.

[10]*Waguinho* became nationally known when he appeared on the *Rede Globo* television program *Esquenta* on February 27, 2011. "Waguinho no Programa Esquenta Regina Casé." YouTube video, October 23, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6l0H8br19b4

[11]Antonio Cantuario. 2013. "Waguinho—Testemunho Oficial." YouTube video, January 11, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07U1q69jGNg

[12]Editora Ultimato. 2016. "Prateleira #33—Ser Evangélico Sem Deixar de Ser Brasileiro." YouTube video, May 23, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lduVl1iSF68

[13]Gerson Borges. 2016. "Dizem que o samba é pecado." *Ultimato* (online), June 21, 2016. http://www.ultimato.com.br/conteudo/dizem-que-o-samba-e-pecado.

[14]While both are commonly described as Evangelical, the doctrines and practices of the PVN could be considered closer to Pentecostal styles of worship, with more emphasis on demonic presence than the CEIZS.

[15]See the recordings of this event on YouTube: Igreja Batista Missionária da Independência. 2015. "Impacto de Carnaval 2015—Escola de Samba Gospel Bola de Neve." YouTube video, February 17, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhFhuX_DUpg.

[16]See the online article of *Folha Gospel*, January 28, 2019: https://folhagospel.com/igreja-bola-de-neve-entra-para-o-guiness-book-o-livro-dos-recordes/

[17]See the TVUOL video that contains interviews with church representatives (https://tv.uol/15j6h) which is also part of the online article: Anna Virginia Balloussier. 2017. "Carnaval gospel tem 'abadeus', cover de Mamonas e racha com tradicionais." *Folha de São Paulo*, February 17, 2017. http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2017/02/1859374-carnaval-gospel-tem-abadeus-cover-de-mamonas-e-racha-com-tradicionais.shtml.

[18]See also an interview with the leader of IBMI, pastor Ubirajara Gomes in 2016: https://web.archive.org/web/20190105040301/http://www.saldaterra.art.br/?p=150, accessed February 5, 2019.

[19]See the first line text that explains BdN's mission accompanying a BdN video on YouTube: Boladeneveoficial. 2016. "Bola de Neve Santos—Bateria Bola de Neve no Carnaval em Salvador 2015." YouTube video, March 30, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7A0vZBOc-M.

[20]For a beautiful thread of comments on the question if Evangelicals should perform *blocos* as strategy, visit the debate on the blog of the Evangelical Ministério Fiel Church: http://voltemosaoevangelho.com/blog/2014/02/debate-ve-blocos-de-carnaval-gospel-e-uma-boa-estrategia-evangelistica.

[21]Ana Luiza Menezes. 2020. "Evangélica desfilará em ala do candomblé da Grande Rio." *Pleno News*, February 21, 2020. https://pleno.news/brasil/cidades/jovem-evangelica-participara-do-desfile-da-grande-rio.html.

[22]See Pregações Brasil. 2019. "Silas Malafaia colocar escola de samba no altar da igreja." YouTube video, March 6, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsiKf3eJPTc. See also Caio Rangel. 2020. "Você viu? Malafaia criou escola de samba "gospel" para evangelizar no carnaval." *O Fuxio Gospel*, February 27, 2020. https://www.ofuxicogospel.com.br/2020/02/voce-viu-malafaia-criou-escola-de-samba-gospel-para-evangelizar-no-carnaval.html.

[23]In the US context, both past and and present, Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996) has forcefully argued against the practices that make invisible the Africanist aesthetics in North American music and dance cultures, as such masking practices are fuelled by and contribute to racial discrimination.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Video clip 1: The *bateria* (*samba-enredo* percussion section) of the *bloco* Cara de Leão at the Avenida Rio Branco in Rio de Janeiro in 2014. Video by Martijn Oosterbaan, March 4, 2014, Rio de Janeiro.