



# 6

## Samba Struggles: Carnaval Parades, Race and Religious Nationalism in Brazil

Martijn Oosterbaan and Adriano Santos Godoy

### Introduction

In 2015, the creative director of the samba school (*Escola de Samba Unidos de Vila Maria*) in São Paulo, Brazil, approached Adriano Godoy, one of the two authors of this chapter. The director briefly explained that *Unidos da Vila Maria* had just received the approval from the Catholic Church in Brazil to develop a televised carnival parade dedicated entirely to Brazil's national Catholic patron saint Our Lady Aparecida, and now he was looking for anthropological literature that could help him to develop the parade, which was scheduled to take place in 2017. He had found Godoy's master's thesis (2015) on the devotion of Our Lady

---

M. Oosterbaan (✉)  
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [m.oosterbaan@uu.nl](mailto:m.oosterbaan@uu.nl)

A. S. Godoy  
University of Campinas, Campinas, Brazil  
e-mail: [a072716@dac.unicamp.br](mailto:a072716@dac.unicamp.br)

© The Author(s) 2020  
M. Balkenhol et al. (eds.), *The Secular Sacred*, Palgrave Politics of Identity  
and Citizenship Series, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38050-2\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38050-2_6)

107

Aparecida and therefore was hoping to meet him in person to reflect on the ways in which the Catholic devotion to Virgin Mary is constituted in Brazil. While extremely honored, Adriano was also very surprised as this was the first time in Brazilian history that the Roman Catholic Church of Brazil sanctioned a carnival parade of a major samba school. What to make of this collaboration and why was it occurring now?

As we will argue in this chapter, the parade dedicated to Our Lady Aparecida should be seen as one in a row of remarkable carnival parades held in the past ten years in Brazil. In these years, different carnival organizations throughout Brazil organized carnival parades that explicitly foregrounded a *particular* religious tradition—Catholic and evangelical—and explicitly identified it as connected to a religious institution and practice. The foregrounding of a particular religious tradition in carnival parades is remarkable because it signals a break with a long-lasting custom to produce carnival parades that syncretically fuse Catholic and Afro-Brazilian elements as national heritage and as popular culture, while downplaying the *explicit* role of religious institutions, practices and doctrines *and* leaving intact the image that Brazil is by and large a Catholic country.

This religious-national configuration, expressed amongst others in carnival parades, has come under attack by different parties in the last decades, not in the least by the evangelical and born-again Christian movements that have grown substantially in Brazil in the past thirty years. In this period, Christian evangelical movements have progressively become part of the political landscape of the country (Almeida and Barbosa 2019). In neighborhoods across the land, evangelical pastors have risen as community leaders and during the last three democratic elections of Brazil many evangelical candidates were elected as representatives in municipal, state and federal governments. Brazilian evangelical churches have become very visible in the public domain. Especially the globally operating *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD)*<sup>1</sup> stands out as an example of the evangelical churches that have become very visible in Brazil. In the past decades, the *IURD* has built many huge ‘cathedrals’ throughout Brazil and its leader owns one of the six national public

---

<sup>1</sup> In English speaking countries known as ‘Universal Church of the Kingdom of God’.

television broadcast networks, *Rede Record* that serves as an important channel of evangelical communication.

Public discussions regarding the relation between politics, national culture and religion have intensified as evangelical groups implicitly and explicitly critique historical connections between national culture, Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions. An influential moment was the public desecration of Our Lady Aparecida in 1995 when an *IURD* pastor willfully damaged a plaster statue of Aparecida during a television broadcast. Several authors have argued that this ‘kicking of the saint’ incident was an attack on the cultural hegemony of Catholicism in Brazil (Almeida 2007; Birman and Lehmann 1999). Besides the particular conflicts between the *IURD* and the Catholic Church, a number of evangelical organizations throughout Brazil have openly criticized particular national traditions, such as the music genre samba, the popular festivities related to carnaval and a host of Afro-Brazilian religious representations and practices that are considered typical of Brazilian society. Instead of portraying these practices and representations as the essence of ‘Brazilianness’ (*Brasilidade*), prominent evangelical organizations have re-identified them as spiritually malevolent and they have openly attacked Afro-Brazilian religious groups. Meanwhile, evangelical groups throughout the country have started to incorporate certain typical Brazilian practices by ridding them of their Afro-Brazilian and/or Catholic elements making them fit for evangelical consumption (see also Reinhardt 2018). For example, while historically many evangelical groups turned their back on the carnaval festivities altogether, in the past decades evangelical groups have started to celebrate *carnaval gospel* during the national carnaval celebrations.

In this chapter, we argue that the evangelical carnaval parades we describe display the desire of evangelical organizations to reform carnaval parades so that evangelical groups can also partake in carnaval traditions and inscribe themselves in representations of the nation, and we argue that the selected samba school parades we describe demonstrate the aspiration of Roman Catholic and Afro-Brazilian organizations to push back the evangelical encroachment and defend their identity as privileged partners of the nation. Our overarching argument is that while Brazilians generally consider carnaval a ‘secular sacred’ national heritage, several religious organizations strive to *re-religionize* carnaval.

To elucidate our argument, we will first briefly analyze the historical religious-national configuration and explain that the concepts religion, customs and *laicidade* were important in framing carnival as a syncretic, hybrid phenomenon, while still pushing the image that Brazil is essentially a Catholic country. Then we will explain the overlaps and differences between televised parades that take place in special arenas (*sambódromos*) and street carnival parades (*blocos*). After that we will give several examples of carnival parades—evangelical, Catholic and Afro-Brazilian—to show how religion is currently foregrounded and what kind of struggles result from these efforts. Our analysis of these parades shows that the recent interests of religious institutions in popular carnival traditions lead to new controversies about things and practices that should be denoted as *culture* and as *religion*.

## Carnaval, Religion and the Nation-State

Even though many Brazilians consider the constitutional separations between state and religious institutions rightful, it would be wrong to depict the Brazilian public sphere as inherently secular. Many of the common public manifestations and practices in Brazil present religious elements, yet many of these have become labeled as (national) *culture* instead of *religion*. Distinctions between these categories had and still have governmental reasons and effects. Eminent Brazilian scholars such as Paula Montero (2015), Patricia Birman (2003), Joanildo Burity (2011) and Emerson Giumbelli (2014) have shown how 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. 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. Around the same time, Candomblé and other 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—which granted non-Catholic religions more freedom—dominant identifications of Afro-Brazilian practices as *fetiçaria* (sorcery) also denied these practices the protection the law otherwise would have granted them (Giumbelli 2014).

For a long time, Brazil was considered one of the most Catholic countries in the world (Birman and Leite 2000). During the republican, dictatorial and democratic periods in Brazil history, Roman Catholicism was tightly connected to national projects in such a way that its symbols and rites marked much of public life (Montes 1998; Sanchis 2001). Many other religious practices could be encountered in Brazil but, on the whole, Roman Catholicism acted as the leading frame in which these religions appeared (Berkenbrock 1998). In contrast to the disguised appearances of Afro-Brazilian deities, Catholic icons, statues and practices were firmly present in many of Rio de Janeiro's public spaces (Giumbelli 2014).

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, carnival parades and samba-enredo are commonly represented as defining cultural practices of Brazil (Cavalcanti 2015; Damatta 1991; Pravaz 2008; Sheriff 1999; Menezes and Bártolo 2019). Such representations were and 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 carnival [sic] 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.' As a result of this constellation, samba-enredo—the music of carnival parades—is part of an embodied and discursive field of collective identifications in a country that struggles with social inequalities intertwined with class and racial categories. Samba music is important for people's sense of history, ancestry and collectivity and popular accounts of samba are regularly infused with religious tropes and experiences.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>We unfortunately do not have the space to discuss the historical cross-fertilizations between religious traditions, popular festivities and imaginations of the nation but many people have described eloquently the complex articulations between popular and elite cultures in particular periods of the nation building project (Vianna 1999; Cavalcanti 2015; Schwarcz and Starling 2018).

Samba music is a genre with many sub-styles and in relation to carnival, we are specifically writing about *samba-enredo*, a style of samba that is defined by collective singing, accompanied by the sound of a *cavaquinho* (string instrument) and a large percussion band (*bateria*) that can be considered the motor of many parades in Brazil. While the majority of samba-enredo parades displays musical and performative commonalities, the context of the parades may vary significantly. Several Brazilian cities have so-called *sambódromos*; large samba arenas where samba schools compete. During the competitions, each samba school presents its own parade, organized around a specific theme. In general, the parades of the large samba schools in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are broadcast live by the highly popular television channel TV Globo, while they are evaluated by an appointed commission of experts who judge the performances. Simultaneously, journalists, public figures and specialists comment on the parades, stating their opinions on television. Besides the sambódromo parades, there are also many carnival street parades (*blocos*) throughout the country. These parades generally do not enter in formal competition but attract crowds that watch the parades or dance along with them as they move through the streets. While blocos are generally not broadcast on national television, new (social) media nowadays make possible the widespread divulgation of street carnival parades.

## Evangelical Parades

For a long time, evangelical groups in Brazil portrayed carnival as dangerous and immoral. Generally, evangelical churches organize(d) so-called *retiros*: camps that take place outside the city, far removed from the street parades and sambódromo competitions. Besides their conviction that carnival festivities enhance adultery, substance abuse and violence, many evangelical communities also believe that carnival traditions reproduce Afro-Brazilian religious ideas and practices that are considered demonic. For example, according to many Pentecostal and born-again Christians in Brazil, samba-enredo music is inherently polluted because the rhythms of samba-enredo stem from the rhythms of the candomblé rituals, performed in *terreiros* (Afro-Brazilian temples).

Nevertheless, in the past decades, several evangelical groups and churches in the country have started to produce Christian samba (*samba gospel*) and carnival gospel. In this chapter, we will highlight two churches that have become very active: the Projeto Vida Nova from Rio de Janeiro and the Bola de Neve Church from São Paulo.<sup>3</sup> Bola de Neve Church is a relatively young neo-Pentecostal church that has grown substantially in the past decade and attracts young middle-class Brazilians. Their pulpits generally have the form of a surfboard and their style of worship aims to connect with mainstream youth culture in Brazil. Bola de Neve Church has increased their evangelical carnival performances substantially in the past years. Since 2017, the church calls its carnival street parade: *Batucada Abençoada* (Blessed Beats). This street parade can best be described as a translocal phenomenon since branches of the church located in different cities practice the same samba rhythms and lyrics independently throughout Brazil so they can perform collectively in one particular place. During the carnival of 2018, for example, the *Batucada Abençoada* brought together seven hundred percussionists in Rio de Janeiro to perform at the beach and in the favela *Rocinha*. Bola de Neve makes ample use of social media and records and shares carnival rehearsals and performances on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.<sup>4</sup>

Though the size of the Bola de Neve Church parade was exceptional in comparison to other evangelical parades, such parades had been organized in Rio de Janeiro before. *Projeto Vida Nova*, a neo-Pentecostal church, has been organizing carnival parades yearly since the end of the 1980s. Each year, the parades of *Projeto Vida Nova* draw together members from different congregations in the city to perform and to witness the parade, to hear and to sing the samba-enredo, and to evangelize while the parade takes places. One of the recurring wings of the parade consists of costumed members who theatrically perform the battle between the devil and God's angels who eventually liberate the captives that immersed themselves in the carnival (Oosterbaan 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Other churches that produce carnival gospel can be found in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador da Bahia (Oosterbaan, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, a YouTube clip of the 2018 parade: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8MRBr4RuA>

Neither Projeto Vida Nova nor the Bola de Neve Church organizes parades at a sambódromo but their street parades do show striking resemblances with the parades at the sambódromo. As common in so-called worldly parades, the parades of the two evangelical churches also have a percussion section (*bateria*) that produces a thunderous and joyful atmosphere. In contrast to the convictions of members of several other evangelical churches in Brazil, these two churches believe that the samba-enredo music is not inherently connected to Afro-Brazilian religious practice and power. According to Projeto Vida Nova and the Bola de Neve Church, all music originally belonged to God, but the devil stole particular music styles and rhythms and made them available for hazardous spiritual traditions and entities. According to the churches, it is not the rhythm that makes a song demonic but the lyrics. The rhythms can thus be employed by Christians as long as the lyrics are godly (see Oosterbaan 2017).

Besides the samba-enredo music, there are also other commonalities between these two evangelical parades and their worldly counterparts. As in worldly parades, the evangelical parades are symbolically led by a *mestre-sala* and a *porta-bandeira*. These figures form a couple dressed in gala costumes that dance in front of the percussion section of a parade. One generally encounters such a couple at carnival parades throughout Brazil and its presence is one of the markers of an 'authentic' carnival parade. The last commonality we want to mention concerns the clothing that is visible at carnival parades in Brazil. Many of the performers of the *Batucada Abençoada* were clothed in so-called *abadás*. An *abadá* is a sleeveless shirt with a Yoruba origin. Nonetheless, in contrast with the worldly version, Bola de Neve Church calls these shirts *aba Deus*. In Portuguese, *aba* could be translated as a piece of clothing that covers and protects, an apron of sorts, and *Deus* means God.

We regard the evangelical appropriation of samba-enredo music and carnival clothing as attempts to uncouple Afro-Brazilian religious traditions from Brazil's carnival. Removing Afro-Brazilian religious connotations from popular carnival styles in Brazil not only allows evangelical groups to partake in street carnival and evangelize in the city during the carnival period, it also allows these churches to breach a popular



socio-cultural constellation in which national Brazilian practices such as carnival are described as having Afro-Brazilian religious roots. This stands in striking contrast to the efforts of other groups that struggle to emphasize the African religious elements of Brazilian carnival (see also Armstrong 2010), yet displays commonalities with the parade sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil.

## A Roman Catholic Parade

The collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and the samba school *Unidos de Vila Maria* in São Paulo in 2017—which we described briefly in our introduction—should be seen as historic. During the live broadcast, when the parade was about to enter the sambódromo, a TV Globo commentator covering the parades exclaimed that he was surprised by the reactions they received from the audience. Two priests, two Catholic dioceses communities and Franciscan monks had written TV Globo to express that they were very excited to watch the parade. A second commentator explained why they had received these unusual messages from the Roman Catholic clergy: ‘We are about to see a parade without bikinis or religious syncretism. The Catholic Church has supervised this specific samba school and demanded specific modifications to this parade.’

Never before had the church formally worked together with a samba school or given its formal blessing to a carnival parade. The unique chance to do so for the first time was possible because 2017 marked the 300-year anniversary of the miraculous appearance of Our Lady Aparecida, the Catholic patroness saint of Brazil. Aparecida is a small statue of Virgin Mary that was found in the Paraíba River in 1717 by three poor fishermen from the state of São Paulo. They had been on the water for a long time, without catching any fish but after they found the miraculous statue, their fishing expedition turned into an astonishing success, which later was considered the first of Our Lady’s many miracles.

The Catholic Church<sup>5</sup> considers Our Lady Aparecida a black Virgin Mary due to the dark color of her terracotta statue, but for a considerable period she was represented as having white skin. According to the historian Lourival dos Santos (2013), she started to be represented as black in the late nineteenth century at the end of the Brazilian Empire and the beginning of the first Republic. In response to the secularization of the Brazilian state, the Catholic Church made much efforts to transform Our Lady Aparecida into the prime symbol of the nation, emphasizing her blackness and giving her titles such as 'patroness of the Brazilian republic' in 1931. In her honor, the Brazilian state installed an annual national holiday that takes place on 12 October.

We can safely say that Our Lady Aparecida is a constitutive part of the Brazilian religious and national landscape. After her transformation into patroness of the nation, she remained highly popular as a national *and* Catholic religious figure. For example, her shrine was visited by 13 million people in 2017 and replicas of the original statue located at the national shrine can be found in many public and private places throughout the country (Godoy 2015, 2017; Rickli 2016). Given the statue's capacity to represent the unity between Roman Catholicism and the Brazilian nation, it is not very surprising that the church used her anniversary as the ideal moment to collaborate with a samba school. It was however not without controversy or struggle and involved compromises from both parties.

One of the most important demands of the church was that participants in the parade could not display nudity or obscenity and that saintly images would be represented appropriately as Catholic and not as syncretic. To make sure that the samba school complied with these demands, supervision occurred by means of two Catholic institutions: the directorate of the National Shrine of Our Lady Aparecida and the Archdioceses of São Paulo. The pressure to supervise closely the appearance of the Unidos de Vila Maria parade is related to the Brazilian tradition to broadcast the parades of the big, prestigious samba schools live on Brazilian

---

<sup>5</sup>Whereas we hold that the Catholic Church should be considered a complex entanglement of organizations and not as a monolithic institution, we nevertheless in this chapter refer to this entanglement as 'the Church'.

television and the public discussions about samba school performances that usually follow.

The idea to dedicate the 2017 parade entirely to the anniversary of Our Lady Aparecida initially came from the samba school. To avoid possible future conflicts, the samba school approached the church and asked permission. Even though the Catholic Church officially approved the collaboration, some Catholics were unhappy about that partnership. Months before the carnaval, at least three different groups protested against the parade under the allegation that ‘an unprecedented desecration will happen with the approval of the Holy Roman Catholic Church’.<sup>6</sup> In response to this allegation, the Cardinal and Archbishop of São Paulo published a letter in the local newspaper to justify the organization: ‘The intention is good and the form as well. Would the place be unfit to honor the purest Virgin Mary? But wouldn’t Mary want to be there where her presence is necessary?’<sup>7</sup>

The church’s newfound collaboration with the samba school and Mary’s official debut at the sambódromo altered popular representations of the religious character of the nation, however. Our Lady Aparecida has historically also appeared in southern Brazil as a syncretic figure representing Oxum, the orixá of the rivers. Nevertheless, as we describe below, while Aparecida’s black embodiment of the nation was celebrated during the parade, her Afro-Brazilian *religious* identity was erased in favor of her Catholic identity. The Catholic Church tried hard to purify the religious character of Our Lady Aparecida while preserving connotations to Afro-Brazilian *culture* and heritage.

The attempt to negate her syncretic character yet preserve her racial identity is supported by the so-called ‘myth of the three races’: an ideological position that maintains that Brazilian colonization was characterized by a harmonious coming together of Europeans, Africans and Indigenous people that resulted in a culturally mixed country where race is no longer a relevant category to power and hierarchy. While academics have generally identified this position as a ‘myth’ (Schwarcz and Starling

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, <https://www.change.org/p/curia-metropolitana-de-são-paulo-dom-odilo-contra-a-profanção-da-irmã-aparecida-no-carnaval-de-2017> or <https://ipco.org.br/51644-2/#.XEGfVMHPzIU>

<sup>7</sup> <http://arquisp.org.br/arcebispo/artigos-e-pronunciamentos/nossa-senhora-aparecida-no-carnaval>

2018), it is still often presented as a fact in politics, tourism and religious institutions. The Catholic Church generally employs this myth to present Catholicism as the powerful ingredient of this mixture of peoples and cultures. In such a presentation, there is no room for other religious traditions and black and indigenous people are simultaneously presented as Brazilians and as Catholics. Ultimately, this Catholic nation is incompatible with Afro-Brazilian religions and with Pentecostalism, according to the church, the national religion is Catholicism and Our Lady Aparecida is the most powerful symbol of that constellation.

This was clearly visible in the design of the 2017 *Unidos de Vila Maria* parade. As in many carnival parades in Brazil, the parades that perform at the sambódromo are made up of different *alas* (wings) and every wing is categorized by a specific theme. The *Unidos de Vila Maria* parade consisted of twenty-three *alas* showing Aparecida's devotional history but here we focus on three that showed clearly the particular entanglement between national culture and religion.

The first wing was the *ala das Baianas* (the Bahian Women wing) a specific wing dedicated to the veteran women of a samba school. Traditionally, these women wear long dresses and turbans, clothing inspired by the ritual garments of Candomblé. Strikingly, in this parade the *baianas* were dressed to resemble representations of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, wearing ostentatious blue and golden mantles and huge golden crowns instead of turbans. The dresses also featured an embroidered (white) image of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception to leave no doubt that this costume represented a non-syncretic Catholic figure. Maria Aparecida was one of the *baianas* who took part in the parade and after the parade she declared: 'I was born a devotee. I am very moved because my family is Catholic practitioner'. Questioned about the 45 kg costume she was wearing, replied: 'the dedication and responsibility to honor our patroness are much heavier than the clothes.'

The second wing was the *Ala Milagre do Negro Zacarias* (Wing of the Miracle of Black Zacarias), a wing dedicated to one of Aparecida's miracles: when a black fugitive named Zacarias was captured, he was allowed to pray to the statue of Our Lady Aparecida before being brought back to the farm where he was enslaved. When he did, the chains that held him captive miraculously fell from his neck and wrists, making him a free

man thanks to Aparecida's intervention. In the section, dedicated to this miracle, bare-breasted black men costumed to resemble the enslaved Zacarias, were followed by black and white men and women, wearing luxurious costumes with plumages and stamps with African patterns. This wing exemplified the acknowledgment of the history of enslavement of African people and their shipment to Brazil, but projected Aparecida as a liberator.

The third wing was the *Ala Símbolo da Identidade Nacional* (Wing of the Symbol of National Identity). The dancing participants of this wing were all dressed in green and yellow, the colors of the Brazilian flag and they were accompanied by parrots, bananas, jaguars and other references to the flora and fauna of Brazil. The tail of the ala featured a *sambista* dancing, on a huge map of Brazil, in front of a gigantic yellow and green crucifix similar to the one at the national shrine.

These three wings demonstrated that the partnership between the Catholic Church and the samba school *Unidos de Vila Maria* produced a particular configuration of culture, religion and nationalism. In this configuration, Afro-Brazilian heritage is celebrated and presented as thoroughly Brazilian but Afro-Brazilian religious symbols and icons are substituted by Catholic ones. The parade exemplifies the Catholic Church's new approach to carnival and shows that it actively produces and polices Catholic representations in popular culture, yet in doing so the church attempts to purify and *de-syncretize* these symbols and icons. As declared by one of the directors of *Unidos de Vila Maria*: 'this year our samba-enredo became a prayer.'

## Afro-Brazilian Parades

In response to the increase of evangelical attacks on Afro-Brazilian religion and the Catholic Church's purification of religious figures, samba schools throughout the country have sought to re-affirm the historical connections between Brazilian society and African traditions and they have often done so by emphasizing the presence and importance of Afro-Brazilian deities. Several of the parades of these samba schools have been researched by a team of anthropologists from the Federal University of

Rio de Janeiro based in the *Museu Nacional* and their recent work gives us great insight in the dynamics we explore in this chapter. In their deep analysis of the parades of *Mangueira* and *Renascer de Jacarepaguá*, Menezes and Bártolo (2019) defend the carnival as a privileged ethnographic place to understand the disputes over religion and national culture. For the anthropologists, the carnival parades in Rio de Janeiro provide a dual classification in which religious practices can be transformed into cultural manifestations to dispute what is the true nationalism.

The first parade we would like to discuss took place in 2016, when the samba school *Renascer de Jacarepaguá*, based in Rio de Janeiro, organized a parade entitled 'Ibejis in children's play: the orixás who became saints in Brazil'. Annually in Rio de Janeiro, there is a very popular feast dedicated to Cosmas and Damian, twin brothers and Catholic saints, who are also known as syncretic manifestations of Ibejis, Afro-Brazilian orixá twins. The most prominent ritual activity of this feast is the distribution of 'candy bags' (Menezes 2016) to groups of children who go door-to-door in the neighborhood (not unlike Saint Martin's day traditions common in Europe). Both as saints and as orixás the twins are seen as protectors of the youth.

Lucas Bártolo (2018), who researched the samba school *Renascer de Jacarepaguá* has convincingly argued that their parade marked a striking deviation from the hegemonic representation of Brazil's religious traditions. Instead of focusing on Catholic representations and leaving room for Afro-Brazilian religious incursions and interpretations, the parade inverted this syncretic constellation and focused on the Afro-Brazilian religious and cultural traditions, while Catholic representations featured much less prominently.

The *Orixás who became Saints* wing was the most representative of the inversion of the hegemonic syncretic relation, however. This wing featured two children dressed as the twin orixás Ibejis. While during the parade, the duo momentarily appeared as the Catholic saints Cosmas and Damian, quickly after they reappeared as the orixá twins. As noted by Bártolo (2018), the succession of appearances in this section deviates from the common representations of orixás and saints, in which Catholic saints generally take the leading role and are presented as most important religious icons. For the anthropologist, who compared the

samba-enredos from 1991 to 2017: ‘the saints are activated by the samba schools to dispute the senses of the carnival party and to discuss the place of culture and religiosity in the city’ (Bártolo 2018: 16).

In 2017, samba school Mangueira performed a parade entitled *Only with the Help of the Saint*. In the Brazilian context, *santo* (saint) is a hybrid word that can denote both Catholic saints and Afro-Brazilian orixás. As noted by Menezes and Bártolo (2019), Mangueira’s reason to use this word appears to be their wish to propagate a syncretic approach to religious devotion. In Mangueira’s parade, men and women dressed as religious figures from Catholic and Afro-Brazilian traditions performed dances side-by-side like Saint John, Iemanjá, Our Lady Aparecida, Saint Anthony, Zé Pilantra, Saint Benedict, Ogum and many others, danced though the sambódromo collectively.

One specific incident laid bare the forces we aim to excavate in this chapter. Besides the appearances of religious figures from different traditions, Mangueira also fabricated a statute that syncretized Jesus Christ and the orixá Oxalá in the same figure, one side showing Oxalá, the other side Jesus. When Mangueira publicly announced the theme of the parade, months before the carnival, members of the Catholic Archdioceses of Rio de Janeiro asked permission to inspect the costumes in Mangueira’s headquarters to evaluate if the parade was not offensive to the Catholic Church. Mangueira agreed and after the inspection, the samba school was told that the church commission did not find anything offensive. Nevertheless, when Mangueira performed their parade at the sambódromo during the formal competition and the *Cristo-Oxalá* figure appeared prominently, the Archdioceses stated that at the time of the inspection they did not see that figure and would not have approved if they did. Following the parade, the church asked Mangueira to withdraw the figure from the ‘champions parade’, which traditionally takes place on the first Saturday after the carnival.

The request quickly instigated public controversy, replicated by mainstream media. Newspaper headlines screamed out: ‘Under pressure of the Church, Cristo-Oxalá figure did not parade’<sup>8</sup> and ‘Church pressure

<sup>8</sup> <https://extra.globo.com/noticias/carnaval/tripe-de-cristo-oxala-da-mangueira-nao-desfila-por-pessao-da-igreja-21011634.html>

makes Mangueira take Cristo-Oxalá off the avenue.<sup>9</sup> Mangueira complied with the church's request but one of the samba school directors responded: 'I deeply regret that there is still a lot of "shadow" in the attitudes of those who talk about "light". Mangueira's parade, among other things, raised the necessary flag of communion and the fight against intolerance. Doesn't intolerance emerge in attitudes? I will quote the words of the "man" who will not attend the parade today: Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

The last-mentioned conflict highlights the asymmetrical relation between the Catholic Church and representatives of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions in Brazil and points to the present predicament of Afro-Brazilian religious movements. Historical processes that transformed the Brazilian carnival into an amalgam of religious and popular cultural traditions allowed Afro-Brazilian religions to be celebrated as part of Brazil's public life and to be represented as part of the nation. Nevertheless, this happened predominantly within a Catholic frame. Afro-Brazilian religion could only appear publicly as a *culture* within a landscape dominated by Catholicism when it would downplay explicit Afro-Brazilian religious representations.

As a result of the growth of evangelical movements in the past decades, Afro-Brazilian religious movements generally find themselves between a rock and a hard place. On the one side, they are battling evangelical born-again Christian movements that tend to define Afro-Brazilian religious practices as demonic and that attempt to redefine the religious character of the nation by way of their own carnival parades, which take up and translate Afro-Brazilian *cultural* representations while foregrounding Pentecostal ideas and practices. On the other side, they are battling the Catholic Church that also appears to be threatened by the evangelical

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://veja.abril.com.br/entretenimento/pressao-da-igreja-faz-mangueira-tirar-cristo-oxala-da-avenida/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://odia.ig.com.br/\\_conteudo/diversao/carnaval/2017-03-04/mangueira-cristo-oxala-fora-do-desfile-das-campeas-apos-pedido-da-igreja.html](https://odia.ig.com.br/_conteudo/diversao/carnaval/2017-03-04/mangueira-cristo-oxala-fora-do-desfile-das-campeas-apos-pedido-da-igreja.html)



growth and, in response, collaborates with a samba school for the first time in Brazilian history. Instead of affirming and defending the syncretic nature of popular religious icons, the Roman Catholic Church—not unlike the evangelical groups that partake in carnival—tends to acknowledge the African *cultural* background of Brazil's popular traditions, yet erases the Afro-Brazilian *religious* components in favor of their own theology and position within representations of the nation.

Afro-Brazilian religious groups that strive hard to become visible by means of the carnival parades and samba schools that battle to present Afro-Brazilian religious practices as constitutive parts of the Brazilian nation should thus not count too much on the Catholic Church to help them in their struggles against evangelical demonization. When presenting Afro-Brazilian religious figures explicitly in syncretic fashion, they are met by the highly institutionalized Catholic Church that aims to control tightly the appearance of Christian symbols in public. All in all, the controversies we described demonstrate that different religious groups attempt to foreground that Brazilian carnival—itsself conceivable as a secular sacred amalgam of traditions—fits their particular religious tradition best.

## References

- Almeida, R. (2007). Dez Anos do 'Chute na Santa': A Intolerância com a Diferença. In V. G. da Silva (Ed.), *Intolerância Religiosa: Impactos do Neopentecostalismo no Campo Religioso Afro-Brasileiro* (pp. 171–189). São Paulo: EdUSP.
- Almeida, R., & Barbosa, R. (2019). Religious Transition in Brazil. In M. Arretche (Ed.), *Path of Inequality in Brazil: A Half-century of Changes* (pp. 257–284). Cham: Springer.
- Armstrong, P. (2010). Bahian Carnival and Social Carnavalesque in Trans-Atlantic Context. *Social Identities*, 16(4), 447–469.
- Bártolo, L. (2018). Cosme e Damião: o enredo de uma cidade. *Ponto Urbe*, 23, 1–21.
- Berkenbrock, V. J. A. (1998). *Experiência dos Orixás: Um Estudo Sobre a Experiência Religiosa no Candomblé*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes.
- Birman, P. (2003). *Religião e Espaço Público*. São Paulo: CNPq/Pronex.

- Birman, P., & Lehmann, D. (1999). Religion and the Media in a Battle for Ideological Hegemony: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and TV Globo in Brazil. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 18(2), 145–164.
- Birman, P., & Leite, M. d. S. P. (2000). Whatever Happened to What Used to be the Largest Catholic Country in the World? *Daedalus*, 129(2), 271–290.
- Burity, J. A. (2011). Religião e Cidadania: Alguns Problemas de Mudança Sociocultural e de Intervenção Política. In P. Andrade & J. Burity (Eds.), *Religião e Cidadania* (pp. 113–144). São Cristovão: Editora UFS.
- Cavalcanti, M. L. (2015). *Carnaval, Ritual e Arte*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras.
- DaMatta, R. (1991). *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Fry, P. H. (1982). *Para Inglês Ver: identidade e cultura na sociedade brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar.
- Giumbelli, E. (2014). Recomposing the Nation: Conceptions and Effects of Heritage Preservation in Religious Universes. *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology*, 11(2), 442–469.
- Godoy, A. (2015). *Aparecida: imagens, espaços e sentidos*. Dissertação (Mestrado em Antropologia Social). Programa de Pós-graduação em Antropologia Social, UNICAMP, Campinas.
- Godoy, A. (2017). Aparecidas no cotidiano. *R@U: revista de antropologia da UFSCAR*, 9, 107–121.
- Menezes, R. (2016). Doces santos: sobre os Saquinhos de Cosme e Damião. In E. Gomes & P. Lins (Eds.), *Patrimônio Religioso no estado do Rio de Janeiro* (pp. 1–23). Rio de Janeiro: Coleção Trama de Ideias.
- Menezes, R., & Bártolo, L. (2019). Quando devoção e carnaval se encontram. *PROA: revista de antropologia e arte*, 9(1), 96–121.
- Montero, P. (2015). *Religiões e Controvérsias Públicas: Experiências, Práticas Sociais e Discursos*. São Paulo: Terceiro Nome.
- Montes, M. L. (1998). As Figuras do Sagrado: Entre o Público e o Privado. In L. Schwarz (Ed.), *História da vida privada no Brasil* (Vol. 4, pp. 63–171). São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Oliven, R. G. (1984). A malandragem na música popular brasileira. *Latin America Music Review*, 5, 66–96.
- Oosterbaan, M. (2017). Transposing Brazilian Carnival: Religion, Cultural Heritage, and Secularism in Rio de Janeiro. *American Anthropologist*, 119(4), 697–709.
- Pravaz, N. (2008). Where is the Carnavalesque in Rio's Carnival? Samba, Mulatas and Modernity. *Visual Anthropology*, 21(2), 95–111.

- Reinhardt, B. (2018). Intangible Heritage, Tangible Controversies: The Baiana and the Acarajé as Boundary Objects in Contemporary Brazil. In B. Meyer & M. van de Port (Eds.), *Sense and Essence: Heritage and the Cultural Production of the Real* (pp. 75–108). London: Berghahn.
- Rickli, J. (2016). Narratives, Movements, Objects: Aesthetics and Power in Catholic Devotion to Our Lady of Aparecida, Brazil. In M. Svasek & B. Meyer (Eds.), *Creativity in Transition: Politics and Aesthetics of Cultural Production Across the Globe*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Sanchis, P. (2001). Religiões, Religião... Alguns Problemas do Sincretismo no Campo Religioso Brasileiro. In P. Sanchis & B. T. F. de Medeiros (Eds.), *Fiéis & Cidadãos: Percursos de Sincretismo no Brasil* (pp. 9–57). Rio de Janeiro: EdUERJ.
- Sansi, R. (2007). Fetishes & Monuments. In *Afro-Brazilian Art and Culture in the 20th Century*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Santos, L. (2013). *O enegrecimento da Padroeira do Brasil: religião, racismo e identidade (1854–2004)*. Salvador: Editora Pontocom.
- Schwarcz, L., & Starling, H. (2018). *Brazil: A Biography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sheriff, R. E. (1999). The Theft of Carnaval: National Spectacle and Racial Politics in Rio de Janeiro. *Cultural Anthropology*, 14(1), 3–28.
- Vianna, L. W. (1999). *A judicialização da política e das relações sociais no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Revan.