

# **BRAZILIAN RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISNI AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN SPIRITUALITY**

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## **Abstract**

This is the first one of a series of three articles that will indicate how a rather intense “mystical culture” of African origin, as expressed in the lyrics of Afro-Brazilian songs, is little by little subverting The Catholic element predominant up to this moment in Brazil, thus becoming the main religious stratum for Brazilian spirituality. The whole series points to the fact that the growth of Brazilian spiritualism is an attempt at unifying Brazil’s heterogeneous population. In order to accomplish this goal, the author pays close attention to some quite diverse aspects of Afro-Brazilian spirituality. In this first article, she describes Brazilian religious syncretism and the development of Afro-Brazilian spirituality; in the next article, she will show how Afro-Brazilian Music appropriates expressions from Catholicism and uses them to refer to Afro-Brazilian spirituality; and, finally, in the last article, she will to the way Afro-Brazilian Music integrates Catholic saints into the pantheon of Afro-Brazilian gods.

## **Resumo**

Este artigo é o primeiro de uma série de três que demonstrará como uma “cultura mística” bastante intensa de origem africana, como expressa na música afro-brasileira, está gradativamente subvertendo o elemento católico até hoje predominante no Brasil e assim se tomando o principal veículo para a expressão da espiritualidade brasileira. A série como um todo postula também que este crescimento da espiritualidade brasileira é uma tentativa de unificar a população extremamente heterogênea do país. Para tanto, a autora se atém a aspectos bem diversos da espiritualidade afro-brasileira. Neste primeiro artigo ela descreve o sincretismo religioso brasileiro e o desenvolvimento da espiritualidade afro-brasileira; no segundo artigo, ela mostrará como a música afro-brasileira se apropria de expressões do catolicismo; e, finalmente, no último artigo, ela mostrará como a música afro-brasileira integra os santos católicos ao panteão dos deuses afro-brasileiros.

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Brazil is often referred to as the largest Catholic country on Earth. However, recent scholarship has correctly come to the conclusion that this is just a stereotype.<sup>2</sup> Even though it is true that Catholicism is the predominant religion in many states of this continental country; it is also true that Catholicism is often but an empty label. In fact, to say that Brazilians are devotees to Catholicism does not say much about them, since the meaning of Catholicism for a Brazilian is not the same as for Catholics from different parts of the world. As it happens in Guatemala, where Catholicism blends with Mayan animism, Brazil is an essentially syncretistic nation, an religious activity there privileges apparently opposing spiritual ideologies. I use the term “apparently” because, as anthropologists have shown, there are always simple logical principles underlying syncretism.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1949s, Brazilian ethnographer Gonçalves Fernandes said- in a rather biased way- that the Brazilian concern for the supernatural was a disaggregating force that favored the surfacing of behavioral disturbances.<sup>4</sup> In a way, there is far from the truth. It is accurate that when a Brazilian says that he/she is a Catholic, he/she does not mean that he/she does not mean that he/she is only a Catholic mass on Sunday and to be involved in voodoo rituals on the other days of the week.<sup>5</sup> However, it seems that Fernandes’ contention is excessively

<sup>2</sup> Luiz Paulo Horta, *Sagrado e profano: XI retratos de um Brasil no fim de século* (Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 1994), foreword.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Edmund R. Leach, Pulleyar and the Lord Buddha: Na Aspecto f Religious Syncretism in Ceylon, in William A. Lessa & Evon Z. Vogt (eds), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 302-13.

<sup>4</sup> Gonçalves Fernandes, *O sincretismo religioso no Brasil: Seitas, cultos, cerimônias e práticas religiosas e mágico-curativas entre as populações brasileiras* (Curitiba: Guaíra, 1941), 150. For a refutation of his thesis and an explanation of the ideology of racial repression against the Afro-Brazilian cults, see Julio Braga, *Na gamela do feitiço: repressão e resistência nos candomblés da Bahia* (Salvador: EDIFBA, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Sérgio Macedo describes, for instance, the syncretism that accompanies the famous washing of the Bonfim church, in Salvador, in December. According to him, the priestesses of the African gods (the so called *mães de santo*) spend the night dressed in their priestly garments officiating their African rits, and then, when morning breaks, they bring colorful jars filed with sacred water in order to wash the Bonfim church. After washing this worldly famous Catholic temple, they attend “a Catholic mass, under the leadership of a Catholic priest.” Sérgio Macedo, *Formação do Brasil* (Rio Janeiro: Record, no date). P. 31. According to professor Eliane Moura Silva, from the University of Campinas, official statistics presente Brazil as a Catholic country, but there is far from the truth, Brazilians easily take

unsympathetic. Brazil has today the second largest black population of any country in the world,<sup>6</sup> and it is my purpose here to indicate how a rather intense “mystical culture” of African origin, as expressed in the lyrics of Afro-Brazilian songs, is little by little subverting the Catholic element predominant up to this moment, thus becoming the main religious stratum for Brazilian spirituality without involving any of Fernandes’ alleged disaggregating forces. Rather, on the contrary, it seems, as we shall see, that the growth of Brazilian spiritualism is an attempt at unifying Brazil’s heterogeneous population. So, in order to accomplish this goal, I will pay close attention to some quite diverse aspects of Afro-Brasilia spirituality: I will describe Brazilian religious syncretism and the development of Afro-Brazilian spirituality; I will show how Afro-Brazilian Music appropriates expression from Catholicism and uses them to refer to Afro-Brazilian spirituality, and, finally, I will point to the way Afro-Brazilian Music integrates Catholic saints into the pantheon of Afro-Brazilian gods.

My suggestion is that Afro-Brazilian music is an important means by which Afro-Brazilian spirituality is enforced in Brazil. Of course music and religion are directly related in all cultures, but in some rituals, such as the Afro-Brazilian *candomblé*, “music and dance become the main vehicle of religious fulfillment and, therefore, are fully integrated within the social organization of those religions.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, the musical vocation of blacks in Brazil was perceived as early as 1610 sugar magnate João Furtado de Mendonça (Who had been governor of Angola in 1594-1602), maintained a private orchestra and choir of black slaves supervised by a French musician and “making music day and night.”<sup>8</sup> Evidently, Afro-Brazilian music followed the path of musical heritages in other Latin American countries as far as its major themes are concerned: religion, first; love, second;

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part in different rituals that belong to different religions without any ideological conflicts whatsoever. *Religions and Spiritist Literature in Brazil*, Brown-Bag Lecture at the University of Texas at Austin in commemoration of Brazil’s 500 years since the beginning of the Portuguese settlement, 04/11/200.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. George Reid Andrew, *Blacks & whites in São Paulo, 1888-1988* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Gerard Béhage, “patterns of *candomblé* Music Performance: An Afro-Brazilian Religious Setting”, in \_\_\_\_\_ (ed). *Performance Practice: Ethnomusical Perspectives* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1984), 223.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Peter Freyer, *Rhythms of Resistance: African Musical Heritage in Brazil* (London: Pluto, 2000), 134.

nationalism, third.<sup>9</sup> Especially during colonial times, it was basically a utilitarian form of music intended mainly to reinforce ideologies and only secondarily to promote leisure and fun.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that contemporary Afro-Brazilian music is still committed to a pervasive spiritualistic element is all the more surprising because present-day Brazilian music in general has been vigorously fighting intrusive foreign elements. Although Afro-Brazilian music has actually been affected by foreign rhythms and other alien components, its lyrics seem more than ever obligated to a spiritualistic content.<sup>11</sup>

Religious syncretism began very early in Brazil. In fact, it started during the time of Portuguese settlement and the slave traffic.<sup>12</sup> Amerindians were found to decline rapidly under the working conditions the Portuguese imposed on them, so the colonists had recourse to Africans, the first of whom may have been landed in Brazil as early as 1532.<sup>13</sup> Because the slave system was particularly harsh in Brazil, “a constant supply of slaves from Africa was necessary to compensate for the losses due to high mortality rates.”<sup>14</sup> The Portuguese did not possess, at that time, any mining technology and, therefore, they opted

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<sup>9</sup> Mario de Andrade, “Evolución Social de la música brasileña.” In: Zoila García Gómez (ed), *Musicología em Latinoamérica* (la Habana: Arte y Literatura, 1985), 141.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. José Maria Neves, *música contemporânea brasileira* (São Paulo: Ricorde Brasileira, 1981), 14-5

<sup>11</sup> Neves (p.13) so describes this tension between nationalism and foreign influence: “Como em todo o mundo, a música brasileira de hoje reflete o dilema dilacerante entre o nacional e o internacional, entre a busca de expressão da realidade sócio-cultural de um determinado povo e a adesão a formas de expressão de maior alcance internacional e não necessariamente comprometidas nas lutas pela autodeterminação artística e cultural de uma comunidade particular. Esta preocupação em forjar linguagens características nacionais, que refletem a realidade de um povo e que, ao mesmo tempo, sejam imediatamente compreensíveis por este mesmo povo é, na verdade, a grande meta do nacionalismo”.

<sup>12</sup> Slave traffic to Brazil occurred from about 1538 to 1850.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A.J.R. Russel-wood, “black and Mulatto Brotherhoods in Colonial Brazil: A Study in Collective Behaviour,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 15 (1974) 576. Robert Edgar Conrad, *World of Sorrow: The Atlantic Slave Trade to Brazil* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 192, suggests an even earlier date: 1525.

<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Wood & J.A Magno de Carvalho, *The demography of Inequality in Brazil* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), p. 140.

initially for the agricultural exploitation of Brazil;<sup>15</sup> besides, they saw the African slaves as especially fit for that task. Another important contributing factor for the demand for Negro slaves was the Jesuits' opposition to the enslavement of the Amerindians. The kings of Spain and Portugal supported the Society of Jesus' stand, whereas neither the Society nor the crown raised any objection against Negro slavery.

Over the centuries, Brazil received perhaps ten times as many Africans as the North American colonies. Curtin estimates that the total number of Africans transported to Brazil, over a period of 350 years, came to about 3,600,000.<sup>16</sup> Fryer quotes the poet Robert Southey (1774-1843) as saying that the black population in Bahia was so numerous that a traveler might have supposed himself in Negroland.<sup>17</sup>

From the 1690s Africans were working not only on the sugar plantations and in the sugar mills but also in the gold and- later – diamond mines of Minas Gerais. Towards the end of the colonial period (i.e. before 1822) they were working on the expanding coffee plantations of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, too. Details are sparse because many documents relating to the slave trade were destroyed by government decree in 1890-1891.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Luis Alvares Barriga, "Advertências", ABNRJ 69 (1950), 241.

<sup>16</sup> Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A census* (Milwaukee: University of Milwaukee Press, 1969), 49. Conrad (p.192) estimates a higher figure: 5,000,000. Boxer gives a vivid description of the way Portuguese slave traders worked in Africa: "Slaves were obtained by the Portuguese in various ways, by war, by tribute, or by barter. Under normally peaceful conditions, slaving agents called *pombeiros* or *pumbeiros* (from a native word meaning 'hawker') roamed the interior regions, purchasing slaves from the local chieftains and taking them to Luanda for transportation to Brazil". C.R. Boxer, *Salvador de Sá and the Struggle for Brazil and Angola: 1602-1686* (London: Athlone Press, 1952), 229. Of course, a great part of the slaves died in the process of being shipped to Brazil because of the extreme conditions to which they were subjected in the transport ships – popularly known as "tumbaes" ("coffin-bearers" or "undertakers"). Despite this fact, the Portuguese had a relatively high reputation as efficient slavers among their foreign competitors. Cf. Boxer, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Fryer, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Melville J. Herskovits, *The myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941). Rui de Oliveira Barbosa (1849-1923), Minister of the Treasury, states, in his decree (dated 12/14/1890) that "the Republic is compelled to destroy these vestiges for the honour of the Fatherland". The full text of the decree is given in Francelino S. Piauí, *O negro na cultura brasileira* (Campinas, São Paulo: publicações da Academia Campinense de Letra, 1974), p.8.

Notwithstanding the large influx of Negroes, the Portuguese brought slaves from different places in Africa to only a few places in Brazil. Slaves came from Nigeria, Benin (formerly Dahomey), Ghana, Ivory Coast, and northern Africa (Sudanese Tribes) to Bahia.<sup>19</sup> From Angola, Congo and Mozambique (Bantu Tribes), slaves were brought to the states of Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, Pernambuco and Maranhão.<sup>20</sup> This explains why there is such a diversity of African-related cults in Bahia: this state received slaves coming from different "African nations".<sup>21</sup> However, the religious interchanges between the different African tribes, slave-owners, and Indians started slowly. Geographical and racial isolation not only hindered the process of religious syncretism at first, but it is also responsible for the concept of "nation" specificity that prevails even today in candomblé cults.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the principal Brazilian settlements, Salvador, Olinda and Rio de Janeiro, were initially more villages in comparison with Mexico City, Lima, and Potosí. Nor did the trade-guilds in Brazil ever achieve a status comparable to those of Peru in the colonial period. According to Boxer, this may have been partly due to the fact that Brazil, even more than Spanish America depended on slave labor for its existence.<sup>23</sup>

Syncretism became more and more intense as the process of acculturation went on. Carneiro has identified over one hundred different candomblé cults in the state of Bahia alone.<sup>24</sup> Only more recently syncretism finally developed into a distinctive set of religious practices. Olga Cacciatore, Chief of the Museu de Artes e Tradições Populares, in Brazil, explains that the development of an

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed description of The slave traffic to Bahia, see Pierre Vergier, *Fluxo e refluxo do tráfico de escravos entre o Golfo de Benin e a Bahia de Todos os Santos: Dos Séculos XVII a XIX* (São Paulo: Corrupio, 1987). See also \_\_\_\_\_, *Bahia and the West African Trade: 1549-1851* (Oshogbo, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1964).

<sup>20</sup> Carneiro says that The internal traffic mingled the different African nations, but that one can say that just before the abolition of slavery in Brazil. The Bantu Negro continued to work in farms whereas the Sudanese had become urban slaves." Edison Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1977), 50- 1.

<sup>21</sup> Salvador was the first capital of the country it was a natural choice for slave traffic.

<sup>22</sup> VivaIdo da Costa Lima. "O Conceito de 'Nação' nos candomblés da Bahia," *Afro-Ásia* (1976:12) 65-90.

<sup>23</sup> Boxer, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Carneiro, 51-3.

Afro-Brazilian religious system was a multifaceted phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> According to her, the development of an Afro-Brazilian religious system is comprised of five phases. The first phase is called *candomblé* the imposition of the *nagô* culture from Nigeria upon the other tribes.<sup>26</sup> The second phase was the *pajelança*, the period in which the Africans adopted some Indian and European rituals. The third phase was the *macumba*, an incorporation of elements from sorcery.<sup>27</sup> The fourth phase called *quimbanda* occurred mainly in Rio de Janeiro, being characterized by a the absorption of diverse elements from Kardecism Catholicism and Occultism.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the most recent phase is the *umbanda*., which is characterized by a return to the more primitive elements of *candomblé* and by a widespread diffusion of its influence in the country<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, the very style of slave traffic, which the Portuguese adopted, promoted religious syncretism in Brazil because the settlers took African groups of diverse origin to the same places in Brazil.

The development of Afro-Brazilian spirituality is to be perceived alongside the different labels the movement took on. The existence of these different phases shows two important syncretistic characteristics: a vigorous; tendency to incorporate foreign elements, and a strong tendency to preserve the core elements of African mysticism.

Bastide, who has some interest in the geography of African religions in Brazil, has developed a system for classifying them according to their geographical occurrence.<sup>30</sup> While Cacciatore's

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<sup>25</sup> Olga Cacciatore, *Dicionário de Cultos Afro-Brasileiros* (Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 1977), p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> For a full account of this process, see Carneiro, p. 16-19. In fact, the *nagô* tribe from the Sudanese nation "became the intellectual leaders of the black population in the city [Salvador]," p.51.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Fernandes, p. 95-118.

<sup>28</sup> Fernandes, p.95-118.

<sup>29</sup> For a full account of this process, see João Camillo de Oliveira Torres, *História das idéias religiosas no Brasil* (São Paulo: Grijaldo, 1968). p. 285-6. NB: Others define these forms differently.

<sup>30</sup> Roger Bastide taught sociology for 17 years at the University of Sao Paulo. His interest for the black people of Brazil was so intense that his MOUP became *Africanas sum*: ("I am one of The African brothers"). His book covers four main areas of research: the description and interpretation of Afro- Brazilian religion; connections between structure and value, religion and ideology; empirical and theoretical concerns; and finally, The discussion of a Marxist's thesis: religion is a man's sigh under oppression. Roger Bastide, *As religiões africanas no Brasil*:

taxonomy derived from a historical perspective, Bastide's emphasizes geographical distribution. Bastide argues that a better appreciation of Afro-Brazilian religion requires a more complete understanding of the role played by the Indian element in its development and geographical distribution. That is why his first geographical grouping includes Pará, Piauí and the states located in the Amazon jungle, where the Indian presence has been more striking. According to him, *pajelança* (Pará and Amazônia), *encantamento* (Piauí) and *catimbó* (elsewhere) became different names for the religion of Brazilian Indians. Initially called *santidade*, The movement started as a reaction against the catechism of the Jesuits, and then became a syncretistic combination of elements: the church, the cross, the rosary, and processions (from Catholicism), and polygamy, stone idols, dances, and tobacco (from Indian cults). The movement had a strong millenarian emphasis due to indigenous resentment against the European conqueror. This movement changed into modern *catimbó* due to The persecution by the Inquisition (1591-2), retaining its emphasis upon tobacco ecstasies.

The contrasts between *catimbó* (Indian) and *candomblé* (African religion) are many: *candomblé* gods are organized as families (The deities are related by blood), *catimbó* gods are organized as nations (geographical distribution without blood ties): *candomblé* participant can incorporate only one god, *catimbó* participants can incorporate many gods; *candomblé* summons its gods with dances, *catimbó* summons them without choreography; *candomblé* singing is collective, *catimbó* singing is individual; *candomblé* is performed in verandas; *catimbó*, in living-rooms; *candomblé* does not require intoxication; *catimbó* does (generally by means of tobacco, alcohol and *jurema*, a narcotic); *candomblé* is performed with atabaques; *catimbó*, with maracas. However, there are contacts between *catimbó* and *candomblé* as well: people can incorporate gods who change their personalities and both *catimbó* and *candomblé* gods are summoned by singing. In fact, Brazilian blacks are said to have cultivated the *catimbó* ecstasy to the point that they gained power over the Indian spirits.

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Contribuição a uma sociologia das interpretações de civilizações (São Paulo: Pioneira, 1960).



Bastide's second area for the geographical distribution of Afro-Brazilian religions includes the State of Maranhão, the so-called "crossroad of Brazilian religions." The state has long been an "island" of African resistance in Brazil with strong *Daomean* influence. It is the seat of a syncretistic combination of *candomblé* and *catimbó*: "fraternity in misery," a case of racial miscegenation leading to ethnic solidarity. However, the African element there is increasing, while the Indian element is decreasing.

Bastide's third geographical area is the region of *xangô* or *candomblé*, which includes the Brazilian Northeast, from Pernambuco to Bahia. It is the area of Yoruba influence. *Xangô* and *candomblé* were names given by the white man (The former is the name of their main deity, the latter is the name of their dance), but the nomenclature reflects differences in economic level. In fact, dancing was a smoke screen for the slaves to perform their religious rituals. *Xangô* and *candomblé* have the same basic structure: early morning sacrifices of animals (The so-called "despacho"), invocation of deities in a fixed order, ecstasy, communal meal and farewell singing.

The last two regions are only discussed superficially. Bastide identifies Central Brazil as the area where the replacement of *candomblé* by *macumba* and *umbanda* is taking place due to the urban development of that region. Finally, the State of Rio Grande do Sul has been identified as the area where the Afro-Brazilian modality known as *batuque* has predominated.

Afro-Brazilian spirituality has thus become a sort of cultural synthesis of the African world. However, a new component has recently become a major part of Afro-Brazilian spirituality. *Espiritismo* (white spiritualism) has come to exert an increasing influence over it. In fact, *Espiritismo* was introduced early into Brazil - around 1863 - but only more recently it has become a viable alternative for black spirituality. Its first phase opposed Catholicism, and was initially successful among the intellectuals. Then it took different forms and reached the lower classes (*Baixo Espiritismo*): Indians, blacks and their descendants. It became widespread as *Kardecismo* (the Gospel according to Alan Kardec) especially among poor whites. In *Espiritismo*, social stratification is roughly equivalent to color stratification. Its most important teaching has been the doctrine of *metempsychosis* (if a white man behaves disorderly he will reincarnate as a black man). There are striking

dissimilarities between the two movements. In African Brazilian spirituality humans incorporate gods, but, in *Espiritismo*, mediums incorporate dead people. Afro-Brazilian religions sponsor colorful, musical rituals while *Espiritismo* relies on formal, sinister meetings. The former promotes the adoration of the powers of nature; the latter encourages the worship of the dead.

The reaction of Brazilian blacks to *Espiritismo* came with the rise of umbanda. The new cult originated in Rio and then spread to Minas Gerais, Sao Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, Pernambuco and to the other states. In fact, there has been some mixture of elements from candomblé and *Espiritismo*. With umbanda came the admittance of whites into the Afro-Brazilian milieu. Such whites collaborated with a superficial reading of philosophy and theosophy. At the same time, macumba (black magic) became accepted but was relegated to an inferior role (that of dealing with the lower social classes). Soon after that, quimbanda became the unaccepted side of macumba, some sort of *Espiritismo* upside-down, because it deals with deviant spirits. At this point, Afro-Brazilian religions accepted the necessity for humans (médiuns) to incorporate spirits. Marxists have denounced umbanda as a form of control of the lower social classes. But it seems, on the contrary, that umbanda has become a vehicle of social ascension for blacks (a new asset in the class conflict in Brazil).

. Afro-Brazilian religions operate in a very distinct way. They have an unambiguous urban character, contrary, to what happens, for instance, with African religions in Haiti.<sup>31</sup> Besides, they strive for the transcendence of urbanization and industrialization and the re-creation of a mystical Africa in Brazil. Other elements that are peculiar to most forms of Afro-Brazilian spirituality are the respect for the elderly and the close attention to the children.

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<sup>31</sup> According to Bastide, several reasons account for the fact that Afro-Brazilian religions have become eminently urban phenomena:

- (i) The destruction of black rural communities;
- (ii) The reorganization of social links through class consciousness;
- (iii) Industrialization as a means for black people to get integrated into the proletariat;
- (iv) The access of blacks to the press and to social organizations;
- (v) Black pantheistic cults prohibited by law (in 1937).

I have traced, here, the origins of Brazilian spirituality. My next article, entitled “Afro-Brazilian Music and the Expression of Afro-Brazilian Spirituality” will show how Afro-Brazilian Music developed and how it appropriates expressions from Catholicism and uses them to refer to Afro-Brazilian spirituality.