

# Urban Interventions, Memories and Conflicts

Black heritage and the revitalization of  
Rio de Janeiro's Port Zone

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the creation of an arena for political and moral recognition stirred by the “revitalization” of Rio de Janeiro’s Port Zone: the landmarking of Pedra do Sal as a “historic and religious Afro-Brazilian monument” by residents who claimed legal ownership of several properties in the area, affirming that it is an “ethnic territory” and the site is “a remnant quilombo community.” The Quilombo of Pedra do Sal became one of the most controversial battles for ethnic recognition in Brazil, because it explored possibilities for broadening the constitutional concept of a quilombo. These possibilities would include, the plea for recognition of an ethnic territory in an urban context; the construction of a history of territorial occupation based on mythological narrative; and a territorial demarcation based on a cultural heritage conceived as the remnant symbol of a generic “black city” and, therefore, without presumed heirs.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage; Afro-Brazilian memory; urban interventions; Pedra do Sal; Little Africa; Port Zone of Rio de Janeiro.

## **Resumo**

Este artigo aborda a formação de uma arena de reconhecimento político e moral movimentada durante a “revitalização” da Zona Portuária do Rio de Janeiro: o uso do tombamento da Pedra do Sal como “monumento histórico e religioso afro-brasileiro” por moradores que, reivindicando ser esse patrimônio o marco simbólico de uma “comunidade de remanescentes de quilombo”, pleitearam juridicamente a titulação de diversos imóveis da região como “território étnico”. No entanto, o Quilombo da Pedra do Sal se tornou um dos

processos de reconhecimento étnico mais polêmicos da sociedade brasileira por explorar as possibilidades de flexibilização do conceito constitucional de “quilombo”. Entre essas possibilidades, a de pleito de um território étnico em contexto urbano; a de construção de uma trajetória de ocupação do território baseada em narrativa mítica; e a de delimitação desse território a partir de um patrimônio cultural concebido como símbolo do passado de uma “cidade negra” genérica e, portanto, sem herdeiros presumidos.

**Palavras-chave:** patrimônio cultural; memória afro-brasileira; projetos urbanísticos; Pedra do Sal; Pequena África; Zona Portuária do Rio de Janeiro.

# Urban Interventions, Memories and Conflicts

Black heritage and the revitalization of Rio de Janeiro's Port Zone<sup>1</sup>

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Until the turn of the 21st century, Rio de Janeiro's Port Zone was predominantly classified by the city's moral geography as a region of prostitution, drug traffic and favelas. This notion, however, was transformed when the city government announced and implemented a comprehensive redevelopment plan<sup>2</sup> for the area in an attempt to combat supposed "blight." With improvements to the streetscape, a surge of bars and venues geared towards a middle class clientele, the renovation of townhouses to attract higher income residents, upgrades to the cruise ship terminal for the landing of international and domestic tourists, as well as the establishment of new cultural facilities, news began to emerge regarding some of the region's sites, residents and "cultural heritage assets."

Despite the local nature of these transformations, researchers such as Saskia Sassen (1991) have pointed out that such rapid interventions in supposedly "blighted" urban areas are linked to an international race to attract capital, skilled labor, and large-scale events, such as the World Cup and the Olympics. In addition, these policies focus on central and port areas of cities, justified by the appreciation of what would be their unique historical and architectural character, although they also lead to commodified tourism, real estate speculation and gentrification<sup>3</sup> (Smith 1987; McDonogh 2003).

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1 This article was developed from fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2009 and published in the doctoral thesis *A Utopia da Pequena África. Os espaços do patrimônio na Zona Portuária carioca* ("The Utopia of Little Africa: Heritage assets in Rio de Janeiro's Port Zone"). An earlier version was presented at the symposium "The Anthropology of Objects: objectification, subjectification, and preservation" at the 54th International Congress of Americanists (Vienna, 2012). I would like to thank the coordinators of the seminar, José Reginaldo Santos Gonçalves and Els Lagrou, for their input, as well as that of João Paulo Castro, Alberto Goyena, Renata Menezes and the peer reviewers at *Vibrant* for contributions to this version.

2 The redevelopment plan encompassed the port neighborhoods of Saúde, Gamboa and Santo Cristo, and in 2001 was named Port of Rio: Recovery and Revitalization Plan for the Port Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Since 2009, it has been reformulated and renamed The Marvelous Port: – an Urban Operation through Consortium for the Special Planning Interest Area of Rio de Janeiro's Port Region.

3 First used in 1963 by Ruth Glass in her study on working-class or low-income neighborhoods in

In Brazil, the combination of large-scale urban redevelopment and the appreciation of “cultural heritage assets” has been the subject of several studies (Arantes 2000; Magnani 2002; Guimarães 2004; Frúgoli, Andrade e Peixoto 2006; Leite 2007; Gonçalves 2007; Eckert 2010). These affirm that the creation of “revitalized” spaces generates local interventions and counter-discourses, sometimes sparking social movements that claim or rethink so-called “cultural,” “ethnic” or “minority” heritage sites. In addition to affirming the culturally diverse nature of Brazil, these movements tend to emphasize the conflicts that heritage assets materialize.

This paper reflects on an arena of political and moral recognition ignited by debate over a cultural heritage asset: the landmarking of Pedra do Sal as an “Afro-Brazilian historic and religious monument” by residents opposed to the “revitalization” of Rio de Janeiro’s Port Zone. These residents, claiming the site is the symbolic landmark of a “remnant quilombo community”<sup>4</sup> filed a legal claim to ownership of several properties which they affirmed constituted an “ethnic territory.” The Quilombo of Pedra do Sal became one of the most controversial battles for ethnic recognition in Brazil, because it explored possibilities for broadening the constitutional concept of a quilombo. These possibilities would include, the plea for recognition of an ethnic territory in an urban context; the construction of a history of territorial occupation based on a mythological narrative; and territorial demarcation based on a cultural heritage conceived as the remnant symbol of a generic “black city” and, therefore, one without presumed heirs.

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central London, the term *gentrification* has since defined the process of investment, rehabilitation and housing appropriation of these neighborhoods by the middle class (Bidou-Zachariassen 2006).

4 The political trajectory of the term “remnant quilombo community” evokes the Brazilian context of racial debates of the 1980s, when the Federal Constitution included an article that created differentiated political subjects who would be entitled to the permanent ownership of the land they occupied through deeds for State “ethnic recognition” (Article 68, ADCT). Before this constitutional definition, a quilombo was widely considered the place where runaway slaves lived during the colonial era, and whose main icons were the Quilombo of Palmares and its leader, Zumbi. After the legal definition was established, two different concepts were merged to redefine the category. The “remnant” concept was proposed to liken the black and indigenous situations, with the rhetorical belief of “the right to memory” at its core, aiming to preserve the site where “historical processes of dispossession” had taken place. The concept of “common land use” defined rural areas where basic resources were controlled by family groups and regulated by their own legal universes. And the concept of “ethnicity” defined a “quilombola community” as a group who considered themselves as such, had a referenced identity in shared experiences and values, and considered themselves different from other identities in the event of land conflicts. This definition was later expanded to include new categories: “quilombola communities” must also have “a unique historical trajectory,” “specific territorial relationships” and “black ancestry” (Arruti 2006).

## The creation, certification and dispute of the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal

Pedra do Sal (Salt Stone) is located on Conceição Hill, a geographical elevation of modest dimensions with about two thousand residents that is wedged between the neighborhoods of Saúde and Centro. Architecturally, single and two-story colonial houses dominate the area, with the exception of the foot of the hill, where mixed-use or commercial activities, such as bars, restaurants, office supply, beverage storage, and body shops can be found.

The rocky outcrop that connects Pedra do Sal's upper and lower levels consists of a smooth and slippery surface, where a sculpted staircase facilitates pedestrian circulation. On the lower level is the small square known as Largo João da Baiana. In the daytime, it is frequented by residents and users of different origins, occupations, religions, and social status. Some park their cars, others lunch at an inexpensive restaurant and schoolchildren play there. On some evenings, the square also attracts samba circles and local festivities. On weekends, tourists are not an uncommon sight.



Pedra do Sal and Largo João da Baiana, December 2007. Photo by Roberta Guimarães.

Despite its diversity of uses and users, the hill, the square and dozens of surrounding properties were claimed by an entity known as the Community of Quilombo Remnants of Pedra do Sal in December 2005. The Community was created in 2001 after the Catholic Venerable Third Order of St. Francis of Penance, owner of several properties at the foot of the hill, began an eviction process against its current residents, seeking to expand its educational and welfare projects in the area. In the following four years, more than 30 families of renters and squatters (who had been living there with the organization's consent) were either evicted or relocated from these properties. However, some residents resisted, and the Venerable Third Order accused them of being "invaders" or that they had defaulted on their rent, to justify a call for the use of police force to evict them.

Among the families cited for eviction, two were active in social movements involved in political activism and the appreciation of Afro-Brazilian culture. Although they had only lived in their residences since the 1990s, they had been living in the Port Zone for a longer period. With longstanding emotional ties to the neighborhood, they then spearheaded the establishment of the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal, and mobilized three other families around the ethnic claim. The five families were practitioners of Candomblé, and had interpreted the eviction notice as a severance of traditional social ties with the Catholic organization, which in the past they considered to be supportive. Thus, in an attempt to halt the eviction process, the families requested that the federal government<sup>5</sup> recognize the region as an ethnic territory.

Shortly after the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal was certified by the state government, a media campaign was initiated by the families that made the request with support from non-governmental pro-housing and ethnic affirmation organizations. The first article — based on a letter written by the families — was published on the website Observatório Quilombola. It accused the Catholic organization of evicting residents due to a supposed increase in property value after the city government announced the "redevelopment" of the Port Zone. To defend the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal, a legal heritage claim was made, which affirmed that the site rightfully belonged to the plaintiffs because it sat on an embankment built by "slaves" and "paid

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5 The Palmares Cultural Foundation, a federal government entity, was responsible for issuing certificates that grant formal recognition to remnant *quilombo* communities. The land regularization process was managed by the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA).

workers” during the construction of the port in the early 19th century. That is, through a symbolic transfer of inheritance, their patrimonial rights preceded those of the Venerable Third Order.

Sitting on an embankment built by slaves and paid workers during the construction of the port, Sacadura Cabral Street is lined with 19th century buildings. Royal decrees dating from November 18 and December 20, 1816 ensure ownership of all buildings on the site to the workers who built the embankment and their descendants. Based on these documents and the support of organizations such as the Movimento Negro Unificado (Unified Black Movement), the Community Board is taking the issue to court.

It is a grand fight. The Third Order also has old documents, albeit not as old (a copy of the license signed by Regent Prince Dom Pedro I, donating the site to the religious order). With nowhere to go, the residents have taken to the streets. Plans include demonstrations during Sunday mass in the neighborhood. (Koinonia, Observatório Quilombola, 02.12.2005)

Other short articles followed. However, the conflict only received national attention a year later, when the federal government announced that it was assembling a work group to write an anthropological report on the historic, economic and sociocultural characteristics of the quilombola territory. An article on the website *Boletim Quilombola* revealed a change in discourse. Instead of emphasizing the legal heritage aspects of the claim, the focus was on religion and identity, based on a narrative about “Little Africa.”

Located at the foot of Conceição Hill, in the neighborhood of Saúde, close to Mauá Square, the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal is comprised of descendants of black slaves from Bahia and Africa. Saúde was the site of all the slave trade infrastructure during the 18th and 19th centuries. After slavery was abolished, blacks continued to live around Rio de Janeiro’s Port Zone, and the area was appropriated as a social space for rituals, religious cults, drumming and capoeira. Popular culture flourished around Pedra do Sal and traditional samba artists drew inspiration from the community. Donga, Pixinguinha, João da Baiana and the writer Machado de Assis lived in the neighborhood. The land was located by the sea and received its name because it was where the salt sold in the capital market was unloaded. In the same port zone, “Brazil’s Little

Africa” was established, a refuge for blacks escaping Pereira Passos’<sup>6</sup> “bota abaixo” (tear it down), an urban renewal project in the first decades of the 20th century.

The Third Venerable Order reacted to what it believed was an attack on its estate by mobilizing the Brazilian media to denounce the quilombola community. In response to a report by the Globo television network contesting the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal, the federal government published an article on its website (Fundação Cultural Palmares, Zulu Araújo, 24.05.2007), stressing that the plaintiffs were “in fact” descendants of a quilombo community. The government argued that the landmarking of Pedra do Sal as an Afro-Brazilian historical and religious monument was their first certification of ethnicity.

Four days later, the Globo network broadcast a story stating that the real estate in question was the property of the Catholic organization, and part of the “national artistic and historic heritage” of the São Francisco da Prainha Church. Its counter-argument consisted of another official heritage designation, issued to the Third Venerable Order in 1938, before the landmarking of Pedra do Sal. Furthermore, it disqualified the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal based on a historian’s archival research, which concluded that there were no “records of a quilombo in the area” (Jornal Nacional, Milton Teixeira, 28.05.2007). The historian challenged the lawsuit by resorting to the colonial definition of the term quilombo (a group of runaway slaves), disregarding the political definition established by the Constitution.

More stories followed, both in favor and against the claim of the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal. The height of media exposure, however, was reached with the publicatuib of the article “Urban Quilombos” in two national newspapers. The writer stated there had been a “proliferation of quilombo residents” following the promulgation of the Constitution of 1988, attributing this to a “purely legal gimmick” and to the political bias of those generating anthropological

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6 The civil engineer Pereira Passos was mayor of Rio de Janeiro between 1903 and 1906. He led several redevelopment works in the port and central neighborhoods, known as the Reforma Pereira Passos (“The Pereira Passos Renovation”). His views had been directly influenced by Baron Haussmann, Parisian mayor from 1853 to 1870, whose plans and policies were self-declared “modernization”, “beautification” and “sanitation” measures. In order to attain this model of urbanity, Passos demolished countless tenements, built a “modern port” and compulsorily vaccinated the population. Several authors have called these efforts an attempt to both physically and morally sanitize places and their inhabitants (Abreu 2006; Lamarão 1991; Carvalho 2001; Sevcenko 2010).



reports. As a case in point, he mentioned the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal, describing the plaintiffs as “squatters” trying to obtain real estate.

At the root of the case, five people who invaded a house and claimed for themselves 70 properties, each worth an average of R\$ 250 thousand. None of them were even born in the neighborhood. They have already obtained reports (I wonder what this could mean) entitling them to the real estate. The ideologists of social justice must be very pleased with this (real) attack against the justice of children and adults of every color whose lives are being harmed. The drug traffickers in the area leave the community alone, but the vigilantes of social causes do not. (O Globo/ O Estado de São Paulo newspapers, Denis Lerrer Rosenfield, 29/10/2007)

Subsequently, no other articles obtained national repercussion; only short updates on the ongoing case for ethnic recognition were posted on the federal government’s website. From the stories, articles and letters published in the first two years of the certification of the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal, an authenticity<sup>7</sup> system was put in place that both legitimized and questioned the cultural merit of the quilombola claim and the social motivations of the Catholic organization. Legal, political, identity and religious aspects were juxtaposed to define each of the disputed assets, be it those that are Afro-Brazilian Candomblé or those connected to Catholic Franciscans.

After the media dispute and the political exhaustion of both parties involved, the families of the Pedra do Sal Quilombo, along with government agencies and some of their intellectuals, reformulated the legal claim. This time, they claimed about 15 properties around Pedra do Sal instead of dozens of properties at the foot of the hill. In the meantime, residents of Conceição Hill were granted provisional compensation — the federal government filed lawsuits that halted the eviction process of all residents, including those who had not participated in the ethnic claim, until the historical and anthropological report on the characterization of the quilombola territory was complete.

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7 Much has been written about the current use of the term “authenticity,” discussing the ideas of truth, genuineness and intimacy that it evokes (Benjamim 1994, MacCannel 1976, Handler 1985, Gonçalves 1988, Clifford 1994). Whether referring to works of art, tourist destinations or the cultural goods that comprise so-called national heritage assets, many scholars question the use of “authenticity” as something inherent to the object itself.

## Little Africa elicited in the process of land tenure regularization

The Historical and Anthropological Report on the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal,<sup>8</sup> created a narrative for the conflict between the plaintiffs and the Catholic organization that presented the site as a contemporary version of Little Africa. The report drew from filmmaker Roberto Moura's book, *Tia Ciata e a Pequena África no Rio de Janeiro* [Aunt Ciata and Little Africa in Rio de Janeiro] (1983), recreating protagonists and antagonists, and describing the site as it would have been when occupied by the "ancestors" of the quilombola group.

In the book, Moura presented a specific group of genealogies, sacred ancestors and gods linked to the idea of Little Africa to prevent the loss of the city's "subaltern and black" memory, so that society could reflect on racial and social inequalities resulting from slave-. His theory was that, because of its history, racial prejudice had become an ominous Brazilian legacy, passed down from generation to generation, manifesting itself in the exclusion of "colored people" from the labor market and the access to consumer goods. According to Moura, there had been racial opposition between "blacks" and "whites" before slavery was abolished. Later, it was paired with the opposition between three social classes: "the masses," "the agrarian oligarchy," and "the urban middle class." This juxtaposition was the result of the introduction of a capitalist work ethic into the country, and led to the unification of the black, immigrant and northeastern classes, which the author identified generically as "the masses."

To highlight the singularities of blacks in this new historic context, Moura showcased the cultural practices of "Afro-descendants" who lived in Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia, according to their Bantu, Yoruba and Islamic origins decades before slavery was abolished. To each of these origins he attributed a characteristic of what he called "carioca urban culture": Carnival groups would be a result of Bantu festivities; Orisha worship, a heritage of the Yoruba religion; and urban riots, a heritage of Islamic bellicosity. The author identified "whites of the Portuguese elite and Catholic church" as the narrative antagonists to this "African culture," thus equating both

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8 I analyze the version of the report that was made available by the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform in January 2007, and completed in partnership with the Universidade Federal Fluminense, by anthropologist Eliane Cantarino and historians Martha Abreu and Hebe Mattos.

practices to define the Afro-descendants' identity boundaries, portraying them as a singular sociocultural entity.

In his version of the history of Little Africa's, the author selected a series of events to describe the times, spaces and lifestyles of Rio's Port Zone related to black cultural identity. He described the trading of slaves from boats that docked at the Valongo pier, and the burial of those who had not survived the ocean journey in an 18<sup>th</sup> century cemetery in the Gamboa neighborhood; the occupation of houses in the Saúde neighborhood (including Pedra do Sal) by migrants from Bahia and Africans in the mid-nineteenth century; and, because of the urban renewal projects of Mayor Pereira Passos at the turn of the 20th century, the relocation of these migrants to the Praça Onze area, in the city center, and to favelas and suburbs.

His narrative focused primarily on the first two decades of the 20th century, when Moura claims a unique way of life was established by those who frequented samba circles at the house of Ciata and the house of Candomblé João Alabá, which he called a "Bahian diaspora" in Little Africa. For the author, this diaspora was part of Little Africa, although they were not synonymous, as the latter was also comprised of "the masses" of several other backgrounds and religions. Members of the diaspora were characterized as slum dwellers, those who instigated riots against the city's sanitation movement, organizers of port unions, percussion groups and Carnival festivities, and practitioners of Candomblé.

In the dramatic synthesis of his mythical narrative, the author proposed that there was historical continuity between members of the Bahian diaspora and those he identified as their "heirs" in the 1980s — Ciata's blood and religious relatives. He also emphasized what, in his opinion, were a series of negative changes in their forms of sociability: the shift from traditional craftsmanship to industrial activities; the weakening of religious and recreational ties following the death of "tias" from Bahia, who were elderly women of prestigious social standing, and the demise of Carnival groups; conflicts in the burgeoning music industry; romantic frustrations; the constant housing relocations; and increased government restrictions against Candomblé practices in popular Catholic festivities. He concluded, therefore, that these negative changes were related to the exclusion of blacks from the labor market and their lack of access to consumer goods, and expressed the racial prejudice in Brazilian society.

As recounted in the Historical and Anthropological Report on the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal, Moura's narrative — in addition to presenting images of tenements, samba, municipal sanitation campaigns, work at the port and Candomblé practices — was used to identify contemporary characters. The dramatic roles of the “white Portuguese elite” was likened to the residents of Conceição Hill, bearers of Portuguese tradition;<sup>9</sup> the “Catholics,” to the leaders of the Venerable Third Order; and the “urban planners,” to those behind the current Port Zone revitalization plans. The residents of Pedra do Sal became the “heirs to the memory location,” i.e. those who embody the cultural values of Little Africa's ancestors.

However, because the families who claimed ethnic recognition had different housing histories, the report argued that the group's “historical trajectory” (one of the requirements established by the Constitution for identifying quilombola communities) should be anchored in the notion of “historical atonement.” According to the authors, these families were emblematic of a cultural and political “resistance” against what they considered a string of historical oppression that would have prevented Afro-descendants from living in the Port Zone and in the city center over the years.

Although Moura's book was used as an important historical reference in the land regularization process, a variation on its narrative was employed in the elicitation of Little Africa. In addition to the Afro-descendants listed by Moura, the report included a deceased port worker<sup>10</sup> who had been born in the state of Rio de Janeiro and, therefore, was not classifiable as “Bahian” or “African.” He did, however, establish a connection between the Port Zone's past and the sociocultural characteristics of the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal since its members defined themselves as Afro-descendants and practitioners of Candomblé, but not from Bahia or Africa, and indeed as descendants of families from Rio de Janeiro state.

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9 On the uses and consequences of the symbolic association between Conceição Hill and the “Portuguese tradition” of its residents during the disclosure of the Port Zone redevelopment plans, see Guimarães (2009).

10 The port resident Mano Eloi is regarded by historic literature as an important leader of the longshoremen's union and one of the samba artists who founded the Império Serrano and Jongo da Serrinha samba schools. For more information on Mano Eloi, see Marcondes (1977), Silva; Oliveira (1981) and Castro (1998).

## **The landmarking of Pedra do Sal in the demarcation of ethnic territory**

However, the legal and social viability of the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal depended on more than a mythical narrative about Little Africa; it required territorial demarcation. And the space that channeled the memory of Afro-Brazilian occupation in the Port Zone was Pedra do Sal, officially acknowledged as a monument of the “black city” by preservation policies.

Both Roberto Moura’s book and the process of declaring the Pedra do Sal a heritage site took place in the same social and political context: the gradual demise of the military dictatorship, political openness, and the rise of ethnic and minority movements. During this period, preservation policies also became a wedge issue, with new ideas about heritage and national culture debated and consolidated in the elaboration of the Federal Constitution of 1988. The resulting widespread opinion was that landmarked sites could challenge monophonic “white,” “elite” and “Catholic” national representations and leverage the autonomous development of the country, combating the cultural standardization associated with the consumption of foreign industrial products.

These reflections encouraged Brazilian society to represent itself as a mosaic of cultures and traditions, with the expansion of preservation policies to encompass “popular culture” and the “daily lives of communities” (Gonçalves 1996). This pluralistic concept of culture was also accompanied by decentralization policies, which encouraged local governments and even non-governmental organizations to propose the landmarking of significant sites (Fonseca 2005).

At the time, racial and preservation policies also merged. Legislators, intellectuals and social movements were particularly interested in discussing the centennial of Brazilian abolition and including articles that valued and affirmed Afro-Brazilian memory and culture in the Federal Constitution, emphasizing preservation practices. Considered socially effective in the production of collective symbols, these practices began producing images that perpetuated, diffused and exposed this culture and memory. Two iconic images were then created by Brazilian heritage authorities: in 1984, the Casa Branca do Engenho Velho (the White House of the Old Mill), an important Candomblé temple in Salvador, was declared a heritage site; and, in 1985, the historic region of Serra da Barriga, the site of the slave resistance movement

Quilombo dos Palmares<sup>11</sup>, in Alagoas, also received this declaration.

In addition to the production of these national icons, the decentralization of preservation practices created other symbols linked to Afro-Brazilian culture and memory in regional contexts. Some symbols that evoked the “black city” were produced in Rio de Janeiro, including the landmarking of Pedra do Sal by the state government in 1984. According to one of the proponents, Pedra do Sal was selected to be a landmark because it symbolized not only an “elite” heritage asset, but also that of the “common folk.” Pedra do Sal was considered to have two important characteristics: it was a “religious heritage site,” capable of representing the Orisha tradition and popular Catholicism; and a “historic heritage site,” capable of representing the migration from Bahia, and the rise of Carnival groups (*Batucadas Brasileira*, Joel Rufino, 15.09.2008). The landmarking, therefore, intended to simultaneously encompass both sacred and identity aspects.

According to the landmark proposal (Instituto Estadual do Patrimônio Estadual, E-18/300048/84), Catholic and military assets on Conceição Hill had been landmarked by the national heritage institute since 1934. Therefore, a new “hierarchy of values” had to be implemented, acknowledging the “black and popular monument” of Pedra do Sal. According to the proponents, the heritage claim’s main goal was the construction not only of memory, but of a “memory site.” They argued that successive urban transformations had led to a process of “decharacterization,” threatening the “evidence of the city’s black past.” Thus, although the Catholic Church was portrayed as a symbolic antagonist, urban projects were presented as the physical antagonists that transformed real estate and streets.

The request for the declaration as a heritage site also used Roberto Moura’s book as an important historical reference to the time span that the preservation policy sought to highlight: the turn of the 20th century, when the “Bahian diaspora” took place, according to the author. The preservation specialists’ concepts of “Little Africa” and “Bahian diaspora,” however, were more nuanced than Moura’s. For them, the Saúde neighborhood was a “Little Bahia” and Bahia was a “Little Africa,” thus articulating an authenticity system around Afro-Brazilian origins that considered Bahia a purer

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11 Several interpretations of the appreciation and affirmation of Afro-Brazilian culture and memory can be found in articles and books, such as in Velho (2007) and Garcia (2008).

heir to black traditions than the state of Rio de Janeiro. Similarly, the term “Bahian diaspora” was redefined. A distinction was made between people from Bahia and Africans, classifying people who frequented Pedra do Sal into two black groups with specific territorial and identity ties: those from Bahia who had lived near Praça Onze and the port and participated in João Alabá’s Candomblé festivities; and Africans who lived at the top of Pedra do Sal and participated in the Muslim cults of Assumano Mina.

Unlike Moura, the preservation experts chose not to mention the social relationships between Africans and Bahians with other groups, whether they were combative or harmonious. They also avoided the interpretation of their cultural continuity and transformation over the years or the appointment of possible heritage heirs. No information that highlighted the social exchanges of these Afro-descendants was provided, idealizing and supposedly establishing Pedra do Sal’s heritage as a symbol of the history black city.

However, despite this attempt at stabilization, the landmarking of Pedra do Sal twenty years later became, along with the eliciting of the myth of Little Africa, a symbolic mechanism in the creation of the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal. Moreover, the plaintiffs used it as a means for creating an identity differentiated from other Port Zone users and society at large. Temporal markers were also created through a ritual calendar that provisionally suspended the region’s polyphonic uses and enhanced its perception as an ethnic territory.

The families of Pedra do Sal began celebrating São Jorge Day (April 23rd), Black Awareness Day (November 20th) and Samba Day (December 2nd), symbolizing, respectively, the cult to Orishas, popular Catholicism and the political resistance and recreational practices of Afro-descendants. The celebrations involved not only friends and neighbors. They were promoted to members of social movements in support of affordable housing, black awareness, intellectuals, government workers and journalists — all considered important actors in the legitimization of the ethnic claim. However, the festivities not only affirmed the legal and political aspects of heritage preservation; their effectiveness was mainly based on identity and religious concepts, considering the plaintiffs “povo do santo” (people of the saint), the term for practitioners of Candomblé.

The celebrations entailed specific rituals, such as the “washing” of Pedra do Sal — the sacralization of space through prayer by sprinkling water; the offering of food to the eguns, dead samba artists, port workers and “filhos

de santo” (children of the saints) who had passed through Pedra do Sal; guests were served dishes associated with slaves, such as feijoada or chicken with okra; and percussion-based musical groups performed. These events operated, therefore, as calendar rites (Van Gennep 1960). Through the progressive suspension of everyday activities, they stirred a period of intense social circulation and gift exchanges with Orishas, the dead, the human and the nonhuman.

Thus, amidst the housing conflict, the Pedra do Sal heritage site spearheaded the symbolic repositioning of those making the claim in relation to mediating agents, public authorities and other users of the Port Zone. From “squatters” and “defaulters,” the five families that formed the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal positioned themselves as “heirs to Little Africa” in the public arena.

### **On the imponderable courses of cultural heritage**

In recent decades, increased migration has led to the intensification of cultural contacts that do not always play out harmoniously. Often times they spur claims for recognition of identity-related differences, be they ethnic, religious, gender-based or of other forms of belonging that fall under the broad umbrella “minority”. And, as noted by Adam Kuper (2002), there is a contemporary tendency to strive to be different, with political struggles appropriating the anthropological notion of culture, and the assumption that identity affirmation is necessary and even desirable.

However, because urban contexts are rife with meaning, social standings and uses, certain symbolic mechanisms must be employed to produce the perception of identity differences. By analyzing the formation process of the Quilombo of Pedra do Sal I sought to reflect on how heritage policies, regardless of their original intentions, can currently be used as catalysts for political struggle, converting everyday polyphonic spaces into symbolically monophonic ones.

However, from the standpoint of its cultural biography (Kopytoff 2008), the contemporary use of its landmark status in the ethnic claim has not terminated Pedra do Sal’s social life as a marker of quilombola territory. The Quilombo of Pedra do Sal continues to be a highly controversial claim among journalists, government workers, intellectuals, social activists and residents of the Port Zone. By late 2009, its territory and the winner of the



dispute between the plaintiff families and the Venerable Third Order had still not been defined.

Regardless of the outcome, the conflict shed light on the fact that the recognition and stabilization of heritage assets in the Port Zone — both Afro-Brazilian and Catholic — depend not only on their political and legal strategies, but on the resonance of their identity narratives and religious practices with society at large. That is, the recognition depends on their capacity to evoke cultural experiences regarded as “authentic,” despite the permanent social tension due to the space’s other uses and practices. And so Pedra do Sal’s intangible biographical trajectory continues, with the permanent possibility of a social renaissance.

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