

# Presentation

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“Religion” and “ethnicity” occupy a central place in the history of anthropological thought. Brazilian anthropology is no exception. In recent years, the political use of the concept of “culture” has led us to rethink our use of these terms and concepts; once comfortably distinct, they have now become blurred genres (Geertz, 1983). One symptom of this change is the fact that the essentialist idea of culture has become an instrument of identity self-affirmation, and has become part of the legal language of rights. Thus, various actors – social movements, nation spokespersons, activists, government officials and intellectuals in general – constitute a complex arena of debates. The categories of “religion” and “ethnicity” take on new meanings in the languages of interculturality, codes, and disputes over identity present in the most diverse arenas: the “natives” – and the State – can now, more than ever before, deal with the “things” of anthropology.

In Brazil, particularly since the new constitution of 1988, religion and ethnicity have assumed, as an indissoluble pair, the form of a new grammar in which multiple agents intervene. The key to this grammar lies in its imminent “generative” power – to use here a Chomskyan and Barthian evocation – capable of creating worlds of new meaning. The articles gathered in this dossier condense some of the main concerns shown by Brazilian anthropology after this kind of “identity” turn; a turn, it should be remembered, that was inaugurated in 1988, and that has become more evident over the last fifteen years.

The most outstanding evidence of the renewed importance of religion and ethnicity can be adduced from the research agendas of anthropologists and the State; demarcation of indigenous lands and *Quilombola* (maroon) territories, policies on quotas for Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples in universities and the state apparatus, patrimonialization of material and immaterial goods, the definition and recognition of “traditional” peoples and knowledge, and so on. Alongside this agenda, a series of tensions lead to the mobilization – often unpredictably – of ethno-religious languages. A good example of these tensions – addressed by some articles in this dossier – is the conflict between the so-called Afro-Brazilian neo-Pentecostal religions.

The dossier is divided into two parts, based more on thematic criteria than on their content or “substance”. However. The predominance of articles focussing on the Afro-Brazilian religions is, in itself, an almost inevitable symptom of the history of research on religion and ethnicity in Brazil. To a considerable extent, studies on the Afro-Brazilian religions is identified, from the very outset, with the wealth of Brazilian anthropology as a whole. However, in addition to this apparent preeminence, the concern that mobilizes the authors of this dossier is an eminently “relational” one: today, for example, it would be almost impossible to think about the identity dynamics of the Afro-Brazilian religions without thinking, contrastively, about the Pentecostal religions, and vice-versa.

The first part of the dossier begins with an article by Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, who focuses on some trends in the debate between the Afro-Brazilian religious field, the black Catholic movement, and the evangelical movement. He asks how, in recent years, various religious groups have positioned themselves in relation to “black identity” and religion. The article provides us with one of the most important keys for understanding these relations, namely public policies geared towards the patrimonialization of the symbols of African heritage in Brazil.

In “The City and the African-Brazilian Religions”, Marcia Contins proposes a focused, self-reflexive commentary based on her fieldwork experiences with Afro-Brazilian religions in Rio de Janeiro. But she also incorporates data on the history of “black Pentecostals” and charismatic Catholicism. The “city”, as a space of flows and transits, invites the researcher to investigate a plurality of actors and new meanings that often appear to transcend the wider labels of “ethnic” and “religious”. In this case, one of the most revealing facets of these studies is the effort to map the construction of subjectivities and specific individual trajectories.

In the third article of this first section, Daniela Cordovil discusses “public policies” on African-Brazilian religions in Brazil. The work reflects the growing protagonism of a series of actors and activists who now occupy leading positions in civil associations, and various ministerial councils and committees. As a result of these policies, the State has devised a broad classification system: the “Afro-Brazilian” religions and their followers are labeled as “povos tradicionais de terreiro” (traditional *terreiro* peoples), and more recently, as “*povos e comunidades tradicionais de matriz Africana* (people and

traditional communities of African origin. The article therefore highlights an important dimension of the relationship between social movements and State officials, redefining Afro-Brazilian religions as representatives and voices of a “black cultural heritage” in Brazil.

The first part of the dossier ends – almost by way of conclusion – with an article by Paula Montero that helps us to think of some of the dynamics that permeate the whole of this dossier by discussing the importance of the concepts of “religion” and “ethnicity” for the political system. The author shows that these two concepts enter into a tense relationship with the “secular world”. An important element of her analysis is the uniqueness of the “Republican state” in Brazil, whose bureaucratic structure was dependent upon the autonomous state apparatus of the ecclesiastical administration. In the first part of her essay, Montero shows that the Catholic Church, through its control of social welfare, maintained its influence over a significant part of the dynamics of construction of citizenship. A substantial change appears to emerge with the 1988 Constitution, which “widened”, so to speak, the notion of religion, allowing both Spiritist and Afro-Brazilian groups to acquire full rights to public expression. The article shows that in recent years, the turn towards a kind of “pluralist normativism” has paved the way for processes of “juridification” of ethnic and religious demands. The conflict between the neo-Pentecostals and the religions that have a privileged relationship with the “national” (especially Catholicism and the “Afro-Brazilian” religions) poses new ethical and political challenges.

In the second part of the dossier, the mapping of the pair “religion-ethnicity” is extended to other ethnographic territories. A sensitive dimension of this extension is condensed in the complex relationship between the “local” and the “global”, or rather – to evoke the well-known formula of Arjun Appadurai (1996:192) – in the dynamics of production of “new localities”.

In “Under the Berlin sky: *Candomblé* on German shores”, Joana Bahia focuses on the relationship between migration and the production of new ethnicities and religiosities among Brazilian immigrants in Germany in particular in the *Candomblé terreiro* of *Ilê Obá Silekê*, located in the city of Berlin. She discusses the local resignifications of symbols related to “Brazilian culture” and the new identity arrangements created by the “flow” of immigration.

Marcos Silva da Silveira then inquires about ramifications of identity

among a members of a Hare Krishna group. This time the counterpoint is Brazil and India. Inspired by the contributions of Victor Turner on the Bhakti Yoga of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and its universalization, the article also focuses on the trajectory of a Brazilian follower of the Hare Krishna movement who, in 1996, took part in the Centenary Festival of the founder of the group, in West Bengal. The author seeks, always in dialog with Turner, to identify the unique factors that enabled a series of “spiritual masters” all over the world successfully to create a vast movement both in India and beyond.

Fabio Mura compares two ethnographically distinct situations: the Guarani-Kaiowa of Mato Grosso do Sul, and the Tabajara of the State of Paraíba. Both cases help us to think contrastively about two types of political developments of the relationship between religion and ethnicity. The author remains alert to a series of recent anthropological debates on the (false) dichotomy of “nature-culture” (inspired by the Works of Tim Ingold, Phillipe Descola, and Bruno Latour, among others) and at the same time, while maintaining part of the theoretical arsenal of Fredrik Barth. Mura concludes that despite the colonial and neocolonial domination imposed by the State, the Kaiowa were successful in maintaining an “organizational autonomy” at local level. The Tabajara of Paraíba, by contrast, followed a different path. The increasing conversion of the Tabajaras to Pentecostalism – while other Tabajaras remained faithful to the use of other religious and ethnic diacritics, such as the *tore* – became a source of internal tensions. One of the interpretative devices for this comparison is the notion of “local traditions of knowledge”.

The dossier ends with an article by Emerson Giumbelli on the effects of the processes of patrimonialization in the field of religion, based on analysis of a survey on the recent designation of historical landmarks as listed buildings by the IPHAN - *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional* (Institution for National Historical and Artistic Heritage). The actors involved in this process produce a new state grammar as they provide “official recognition” of a series of Catholic and Afro-Brazilian places of worship (temples, churches, territories). The article poses the challenge of thinking of the new languages for the construction of “nationality” that emerge in these processes of patrimonialization.

The articles presented here are situated, in addition to the various ethnographic contexts on which they focus, at a particular moment in the construction of anthropological knowledge about the self-conscious and

reflexive actors who give life to the complex drama of ethno-religious creativity. They come from the most diverse segments of the public sphere: spokespersons of the State (like the IPHAN and other ministerial agents), intellectuals, social movements, activists, religious leaders, anthropologists, and various “interpreters” of the nation. We are therefore faced with a plurality of voices that compete, each in their own way, for the meaning of “culture”. This “dual hermeneutic” – or reflexivity – has substantially changed the conditions in which we conduct our own research. Now, a series of actors challenge the *docto* knowledge of anthropology, i.e. the science that reflects with particular emphasis on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of human experience. The contributions of this dossier therefore propose new itineraries and cartographies, in order to deal with those dilemmas. Part of this effort is the need to renew our theoretical imagination, so that we can dialog with interlocutors who, while not specialists, incorporate an anthropological language into their political demands. Evoking the well-known reflections of Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (2009), we are therefore faced with a tension between culture and “culture” (in inverted commas), in other words, we see that the line that separates culture (analyzed by the anthropologists) and “culture” (as a political-activist construction) no longer seems to be clearly-defined. This is a slippery slope that often passes by the uncertainties of political life, or as Max Weber would say, by the “momentum” in which specific disputes are capable of generating new micro-universes of meaning. The chapters of this dossier enquire, with the same anthropological perplexity, about the polysemic effects produced by these tensions.

## REFERENCES

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