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# ‘Instrumental Primordialism’?

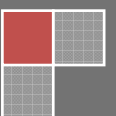
The Politics of Representation among a Black Cultural Group in a Town of Bahia, Brazil

Workshop “Rethinking Primordialisms: Kinship, Religion, and Ethnicity in the Formation of Modern Nationalism”, 6<sup>th</sup> EASA Conference, Cracow, Poland, 26-29 July.

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BEYOND PRIMORDIALISM VS INSTRUMENTALISM

Following Anthony D. Smith, I believe that it is important to distinguish ‘strong’ from ‘weak’ primordialism. In the strong version, ‘...ties themselves are universal, natural and given in all human associations, as much as are speech or kinship...’ (1994:707), whereas the weak version ‘... claims that ethnic ties and sentiments are deep-seated and non-rational so far as the participants are concerned; members of ethnic communities feel that their community has existed "from time immemorial", and that its symbols and traditions possess a "deep antiquity", which gives them a unique power’ (1994:707). Furthermore, Smith notes that participant primordialism, ‘the approach which emphasises the felt longevity of ethnic ties for the people bound by them’ (1994:707), commands a somewhat larger following, on the aftermath of Shils’ and Geertz’s work (Shils 1957, Geertz 1963, Fishman 1980).

As an ethnographer I am much more sympathetic with the ‘participant primordialism’ approach, since it is compatible with my informants’ discourses. However, their concrete practices in the ethnopolitical arena are mutable, contradictory and in constant dialogue with group and individual interests. In this sense, an ‘instrumentalist attention’ is definitely useful. If a weak, participant primordialism might be useful to account for the longevity of certain ties (both ‘real’ and ‘felt’), an ‘instrumental primordialism’ (as I would tentatively call it) might be useful to account for the political-symbolic strategies of my informants. Instrumentalism per se runs the risk of ultimately depending on an individualistic theory of the social actor, one the one hand, or of pointing towards a vague social constructionism equated with sheer invention, on the other (see Bell 1975, Enloe

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1973, Brass 1974). Primordialism per se runs the risk of naturalization and essentialization.

Hutchinson and Smith say that 'Few scholars in practice adhere to either the primordialist or the instrumentalist pole tout court' (1996:9) and that there have been few systematic attempts to synthesise the two types of approach. They believe that both McKay and Scott have demonstrated that this can be done on a theoretical level but doubt that such syntheses can be empirically helpful (McKay 1982, Scott 1990). But rather than looking for a synthesis of the primordialism /instrumentalism dichotomy - or looking for absolute alternatives in the approach to ethnicity (Barth's 1969 transactionalism, Horowitz's 1985 social psychological approach or Armstrong's 1982 and Smith's 1986 ethno-symbolic theory), what I propose is a *distinction of levels of analysis* and a consideration of the local, national and global contexts. By the former I mean that native theories of ethnic identity can be manifold and contradictory - from, so to speak, '*sauvage* primordialism' to '*sauvage* instrumentalism'. In the end, they aren't even theories of 'ethnic' identity, but rather discourses/practices of negotiation in conditions of difference and inequality. By the latter I mean that any consideration of the *movement* of ethnic identification needs, today, to take into account the overlapping of local (and regional), national and global political-symbolic resources and ties of identity (see Cohen 1969, Bhabha 1990, Hall 1993, 1997(1972), Gilroy 1997).

The case I will present concerns a social situation where lines of cleavage are lines of both difference *and* inequality. The primordial fact of classification as a necessary condition of social existence in the Durkheimian sense (Comaroff 1987) does not mean that those lines have to be drawn along certain types of social relations /institutions and not others. But it also does not mean that 'anything goes' and that strategies, circumstances and instrumentalizations are the mere sum-total of individual decisions or the necessary outcome of a determining principle. The historical construction of race in Brazil, and the process of the division of labour are decisive factors and they are intertwined. But, today, they meet local and regional lines of cleavage, ethnic idioms for the reconstitution of politically active identifications, as well as global scapes where diasporic meanings are made available.

ILHÉUS, BAHIA, BRAZIL (AND BEYOND)

The town of Ilhéus is the second largest in the state of Bahia, Northeast Brazil, with a population around two hundred thousand. The coastal region of southern Bahia, where it is located, went through a demographic and economic boom in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when cocoa plantations became the main activity, on the aftermath of violent land take-overs by pioneers who soon became local patrons to increasing numbers of immigrants from the dry north-eastern hinterland, as well as to urban Blacks engaged in the harbour activities. Nowadays cocoa production has declined, migration from the countryside to the city has increased, as well as poverty, unemployment and shantytowns. The local elite (whether descendants of ex-plantation owners or white-collar employees and cadres) is (self-) classified as 'white', holds political power and is now engaged in the rebuilding of the local economy through tourism. The rhetoric of tourism as the grand alternative focuses on current global notions of 'eco-tourism' and 'cultural tourism', i.e., the merchandising of authenticity and specificity, be it 'natural' or 'cultural'.

The state of Bahia (but not the region of Ilhéus) was the site of the sugar plantation economy of the early colonial times, based on slavery. It was the single most important point of arrival for African slaves in Brazil. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century (but increasingly so ever since the official abolition of slavery in 1888 and the growth of Salvador as an urban centre) it became the symbolic centre of Brazilian blackness. Salvador has been marketed in the last twenty years as the capital of Black or Afro-Brazilian expressive culture: Carnival, *Blocos Afro*, music and dance, *capoeira*, food, and religion (*candomblé*). The evolution of a Black identity in Brazil, especially in what concerns an increasing orthodox definition of Afro-Brazilian religion, has turned Bahia (and Salvador in particular) into the authoritative centre of this identity. It is not only portrayed as 'Africa in Brazil', but actually as the locus of preservation of 'Africanness', to which Africans themselves (seen as de-Africanized by colonialism) could supposedly turn to for inspiration.

This construction of an African Bahia was achieved through a politics of cultural expression by the Blacks and soon co-opted as 'popular culture' by the intelligentsia and the state. After the re-establishment of democracy in Brazil in the 1980s the public arena was taken over not only by the, until then, restrained social movements of the 'second generation' (political parties, trade unions) but also by 'third generation' ones, notably those set up around the issues of culture, ethnicity and

'race'. These movements took to the streets at the same time that, in the international arena, ethnic and identity politics were at their highest. Furthermore, Black identity politics had already an established and legitimised presence in many countries, especially the U.S. Blacks took to the streets in Salvador mostly during Carnival and all public cultural and traditional events. They did so through the *Blocos* ('Blocks'), large groups of people dancing to the sound of percussion bands playing music inspired in the ritual rhythms of Candomblé, wearing 'African' clothes, singing about African roots, resistance to slavery or racism in Brazil. These Salvador Blocks (notably Olodum and Ilê Ayê) were to become, in the last twenty years, large organisations engaged in the recovery, maintenance and promotion of Black expressive culture. They have not been immune to processes of commodification of that culture.

Simultaneously, democracy in Brazil witnessed the emergence of a Black political movement focused on the fight against racism. This movement, notably the Movimento Negro Unificado (M.N.U.), is heir to previous experiences that go back to the 1920s and 30s (see Andrews 1980, Hanchard 1994). But as of the late 1970s and early 1980s it re-emerged as part of a political culture shared with Liberation Theology, the trade union movement and socialist political parties. The 'Political' movement has never been truly effective in setting the agenda of racism and anti-racism in Brazilian society, as opposed to the 'Cultural' movement, even in those cases where the membership of the two overlap. This is related to what Hanchard (1994) has called the problem of culturalism in the Brazilian racial hegemony<sup>1</sup>.

The Brazilian 'racial problem' has been the focal point of attention in the projects and debates of and about national identity. To make a long story short I will summarise the main periods and identify the main conundrums with which I believe Black identity is faced nowadays. Brazil, like the rest of Latin America, became independent (in 1822) through a power take-over by local white elites<sup>2</sup>. In the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> '...the politics and aesthetics of the movimento negro have always been intertwined out of necessity... many Afro-Brazilian activists equate the micro-politics of cultural representation with the macropolitics of racial violence, market inequalities and lack of formal political representation (...) The ever-present challenge for the movement is the unification of culture and politics and, more importantly, the differentiation between culture as folklore from culture as a valuative basis for ethico-political activity '(1994:100).

<sup>2</sup> Portuguese-Brazilian landowners and the cadres that administered the polity when the Portuguese capital was established in Rio de Janeiro during the French invasion of metropolitan Portugal.

century - and in tune with dominant western racial ideologies - the future of the nation was seen as doomed by the overwhelming numbers of Blacks / slaves. The main source of anxiety was the practice of miscegenation, thought to be the cause of 'racial degeneration'. Simultaneously, the so-called "myth of the three races" was established. It defined the Indians as the romantic sons of the land (conveniently subdued and marginalized), the whites as the heirs of European Civilisation and the Blacks as the 'dangerous classes'. Miscegenation was, however – and rather paradoxically -, acknowledged as a specific and original characteristic of Brazil. Debates around its effects (racial degeneration versus the creation of a new people in the Americas) were recurrently 'solved' by means of theories and expectations around 'whitening'<sup>3</sup>, i.e. the notion that, were miscegenation to continue, the superiority of 'white blood' would triumph.

A major change was to occur in the 1930s, a period of strong and fierce national identity definition. Gilberto Freyre's work - based on a Boasian separation of race and culture - was the epitome of a new approach to the racial problem, one that was already present in the ambiguities of previous approaches by physicians, anthropologists, writers and politicians. According to Freyre, Brazil was an exceptional case in human History because Portuguese colonialism had also been exceptional. Why? Basically because of a supposed proclivity of the Portuguese towards miscegenation. The colonial period was then seen as the time when, by means of sex and reproduction (intercourse between free white men and black women slaves), the conflicts inherent to the slavery and plantation system had been overcome. From then on, whitening became something different: the process by which the country's population would become less black in phenotype, but blacker in culture (i.e., music, food, religion, body expressions, language). Freyre's interpretation became official, largely because it fitted well into common sense notions of national identity and the nationalist project of the contemporary para-fascist 'Estado Novo'. Race became - and to a certain extent still is - a taboo issue. The notion of 'racial democracy' was established then as part of Estado Novo's propaganda, and all of race's explanatory value was transferred either to 'class' or to its future dismissal as an expected outcome of miscegenation.

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<sup>3</sup> Not just expectations. Immigration policies in the turn of the century officially privileged white European immigrants.

Brazil was to become, in the 1950s-60s, a case study in the international production around race. The UNESCO project intended to find the secret ingredients that made Brazil a racial democracy and to find the recipe that could be applied elsewhere. The project was largely based on comparisons between the racial formations of Brazil and the USA (anthropologists like Nogueira, Hutchinson, Marvin Harris, Degler, Wagley and Thales de Azevedo took part). The findings did not confirm the hypothesis, since many of these studies denounced the existence of racism at the interpersonal and social-economic levels, even though it was absent from the legislation. Florestan Fernandes (1985) would establish a further interpretation of these studies, defining the relation between race and class as the locus of the Brazilian racial formation subsequent to the abolition of slavery (a tendency followed by studies in the 1970s based on statistical data - see Hasenbalg 1979, 1988). But the argument based on the comparison between the pernicious 'one drop rule' of the American south and the supposedly more subtle and unspeakable 'colour continuum' and 'mulatto-ness' of Brazil lingered on until today, if not so much in the social science, at least in common sense notions.

One fundamental aspect must be retained from these developments. That is the fact that up until the 1980s 'race' was depoliticised in Brazil, thanks to a double discourse: the supposed inexistence of racism proved by the (also largely assumed) practice of miscegenation (not stating who miscegenates with whom); and the hybridisation at the cultural level, with the strong contribution of Blacks to the areas of expressive, sensorial, and bodily culture. The historical compost of such notions as 'racial degeneration', 'miscegenation', 'whitening', 'racial democracy' creates a problem for Blacks who want to assert their identity and make possible their upward mobility. Things changed, however, in the contemporary period of worldwide ethnic resurgence, local and regional claims within the weakening nation-state, economic and cultural globalisation, and the dwindling politics based on class and trade-union allegiances.

#### THE 'AFRO-CULTURAL' MOVEMENT IN ILHÉUS

The two trends of the current Black movement coexist in Ilhéus. On the one hand there is a local chapter of the MNU (Unified Black Movement). On the other hand there is the CEAC (Council of Afro-Cultural Entities of Ilhéus). The former was

headed (in the ethnographic present) by Moacir. He had come from Salvador to organize the local trade-union movement, he was a member of the left-wing PT (Workers' Party), he had started his life as an activist in the progressive local-level organisations of the Catholic Church, and he had also been initiated into the Candomblé religion ('return' to Candomblé is increasingly part of Black activists' life trajectories). The latter was a committee gathering representatives of around fifteen Afro Blocks and a *capoeira* group. Moacir was also the head of the cultural programmes at the local Cultural Foundation, sponsored by the local municipality. That was the reward for a political alliance between the mayor and the Black movement. He was always present at the CEAC meetings. The purpose of the CEAC was to organise Carnival, find sponsors for the Blocks' performances and define the themes that were to be the guiding lines for the creation of musical scores, dress, and choreography.

Moacir always balanced between two stances. On the one hand he wanted the Blocks to be more assertive in their demonstrations of anti-racism, and more political. On the other hand he acknowledged the municipal purpose of turning Ilhéus into a tourist destination and accepted the notion that the Afro Blocks were at the centre of what the city had to offer as cultural specificity and authenticity<sup>4</sup>. The members of CEAC were mostly concerned with finding money for their projects and were competing for the same resources. Eventually what fieldwork demonstrated was that neither Moacir had real power, nor the Blocks were able to absorb a real political stance. The power to allocate public funds was in the hands of the mayor. Officially, that is, since his wife was unofficially in charge of decisions regarding Culture in Ilhéus. Access to public funds would depend on good patron-client relations with her. Most blocks would end up retrieving to established ways of finding their funding: by doing shows at local hotels and events; mostly by accepting the sponsorship of political candidates during election campaigns (see Goldman 1999).

## DILAZENZE

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the idea that Candomblé in Ilhéus was mostly of the 'Angolan nation', as opposed to Salvador, mostly of the 'Nagô Nation'. 'Nations' are different traditions in Candomblé, supposedly because of different regional provenances of African slaves. Angola, as opposed to Nagô, welcomes specifically Brazilian spiritual entities (mostly Indians) besides the African orixás. The blocks in Ilhéus also claim this originality - thus contributing for regionalisation within Bahia.



Afro Blocks in Ilhéus are neighbourhood-level organisations. Furthermore, the core of their membership is a kin group, to which neighbours are added (although neighbourhood and kinship may overlap). In some cases, the core kin group overlaps with the family of a *mãe de santo*<sup>5</sup> (Candomblé ‘priestess’). Common to all Blocks is the fact that their neighbourhoods are among the poorest in town, its members are either unemployed or work in the informal sector, and they are classified as Black. During fieldwork, Marinho from Afro Block Dilazenze was elected president of the CEAC. His block is probably the most important and popular in Ilhéus. It has gone further in the process of emulating the big Blocks from Salvador; it is also involved in a more efficient way with local politics, and uses the rhetoric of the Afro Blocks’ cultural capital as a contribution for the city’s project of tourism promotion; and it is the most embedded in the web of neighbourhood, kinship and religion.

I will use Dilazenze as a representative example of a trend and in order to show how primordial ties can be distinguished from primordialist rhetoric; and how the latter can be used instrumentally for the persecution of interests that are simultaneously group-based and collective/political - and which meet the primordialist expectations of the society at large (be it Brazilian or global).

Dilazenze was founded in 1986 as a ‘Cultural Group’ including a Block. Its headquarters are in the neighbourhood of Conquista, one of the blackest and poorest in Ilhéus. Marinho was made president following the instructions of his mother, Mãe Hilsa. She is the head priestess of the Terreiro Tombency, a local Candomblé house. Through oracle divination, the orixás (the supernatural entities) commanded that Marinho be the president of Dilazenze. This means that Marinho has an *obrigação* (‘obligation’) - a duty towards an orixá and, metonymically, towards his candomblé community. The ‘duty’ was established for an initial period of 7 years, later extended to 14 and then 21 years. His work as leader of the Afro Block is, therefore, a religious prescription, the success of which depends on how well he relates to the orixá that is the ‘head’ of Dilazenze. His dealings with the orixá are of a contractual nature, i.e., he has to give regular offerings and obey whatever taboos and prescriptions are set by

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<sup>5</sup> Literally ‘mother of saint’, or *ialorixá* (in the Brazilian spelling of the Yoruba word). Throughout the paper I shall also use the local expressions ‘pai-de-santo’ (for a man), ‘filho/filha-de-santo’ (son/daughter).

tradition in the dealings with the orixá. The following narrative by Mãe Hilsa (extracted from my field diary) illustrates a few points that I want to argue:

‘The oldest house-of-Angola [house of Candomblé of the Angola Nation - see footnote 4] in Bahia is that of Maria Jenoveva do Bonfim, also known as Maria Neném. She was born in 1865, but one does not know when she opened her house. She was the founder of Terreiro Tombency in Salvador. (...) She died in 1945. Her *pai de santo* was Roberto Barros Reis, an African who got his name from his owner, since he was a slave to a certain Barros Reis. Since he was the only *angoleiro* [Angola nation candomblé practitioner] in Bahia and Maria Neném his only *filha-de-santo*, it is said that all houses of Angola are “sons”, “grandsons” and “great grandsons” of hers. The word “Tombency” means strength, fortress. Tombency is a tree trunk, a strong tree. You lean on it and you’ll never fall. The story of Terreiro Tombency Neto [grandson] in Ilhéus started in 1885, when Tiodolina, whose ritual name was Yá Tidú, founded the Terreiro Aldeia de Angorô, in a place called Catongo. Yá Tidú stands for the first generation of the Rodrigues family at the head of a Candomblé house. She stayed until 1914, when she died. The second generation is represented by Euzébio Félix Rodrigues, carnal son of Yá Tidú. His first terreiro was in Salvador and his title was Gombé. Euzébio also owned a hotel in Salvador. Once upon a time he had an African guest called Hipólito Reis, a man of great importance in the history of Tombency. He was a “babalaô (*pai de santo*) in Africa” and was Euzébio’s *pai de santo*, since Euzébio had started his activity in Candomblé without having been initiated by anyone in particular [a rare event: this adds mythical, foundational ‘power’]. Euzébio and Hipólito became friends and started going frequently to Ilhéus. Euzébio, then, founded a terreiro in Ilhéus, em 1915, thus continuing his mother’s (Yá Tidú) work. It was the “Terreiro de Roxo Mucumbo”. He led the house until 1941, when he died. Once he was in Salvador and sent a telegram to Roxa, his carnal sister, telling her that he would arrive in Ilhéus on the boat “Itacaré”. When he was almost entering the harbour, there was an accident with the boat, and many people died. The family was desperate thinking that Euzébio might have died too. In the midst of despair another telegram arrived. In it, Euzébio said that he was not taking the boat after all since he had received a message from Ogum, his saint [orixá], saying that he should not get on board. Euzébio actually saw Ogum, with his emblem sword in hand, warning him. (...) During his frequent visits to Ilhéus, Hipólito Reis prescribed the obligations for Izabel Rodrigues Pereira, Dona Roxa. He did the same to Hilsa Rodrigues, carnal daughter of Dona Roxa and future heir to her post. Hipólito Reis’ ritual name was Dilazenze Malungo, which means “strength for the iaô [*filha de santo*]”. His importance for Tombency was such that, several decades later, his ritual name was chosen to name the Dilazenze Cultural Group. Hipólito Reis died before he could complete the “obligations” [ritual prescriptions for initiation ] of Dona Roxa and Mãe Hilsa. Marcelina Plácida, also called Dona Maçú, took the task into her hands. She was *filha-de-santo* of Maria Jenoveva do Bonfim, who founded Tombency in Salvador. It was then that the histories of the two *terreiros* crossed and mingled and, since she was Dona Maçú’s *filha de santo*, Mãe Hilsa named the terreiro “Terreiro Tombency Neto [grandson]”. She stands for the third generation of the Rodrigues family, having started her work at the head of the terreiro in 1942, one year after the death of her brother Euzébio. (...) The Terreiro Tombency Neto has already

generated around 60 other houses - the Tombency Bisnetos [great grandsons]. Today they exist in São Paulo, Rio and so on, as well as Ilhéus, where there are about 30 *filhas de santo* who have already opened their houses. In spite of difficulties [and persecutions by the Police until the sixties], the terreiro Tombency has been resisting for 112 years. An important moment for the terreiro Tombency Neto was the foundation of Grupo Cultural Dilazenze, in 1986. The proximity of terreiro and Dilazenze goes beyond kinship. Of course many of the members of Dilazenze are also part of Mãe Hilsa's terreiro, besides being her carnal sons. But the relationship is stronger than that, since the *fundamentos* [magical substances for the consecration of the terreiro, which are buried under the floor of the main room, destined for public rituals] of Dilazenze are together with those of the terreiro (...). All the main members of Dilazenze have gone through "obligations", which can not be undone.'

## I

According to this summary of a narrative collected in the field<sup>6</sup>, the Block is portrayed as part and parcel of the terreiro. Not only the name was given after that of the founding figure, but also the founding of the block is seen as an important moment in the terreiro's long history. It signifies the moment when the terreiro opened up to the wider society: it started taking to the streets in Carnival, promoting expressive culture beyond the largely secret prescriptions of religious activity, yet remaining rooted in ritual prescription. Furthermore it draws its legitimacy - and 'strength' - from a history that amalgamates several lines of time, genealogy, and belonging: Africa as the place of origin; carnal family as the line of anchoring; 'family of saint' as the basis for the history of the terreiro (note the use of the language of kinship<sup>7</sup>) as the narrative of authority and supernatural legitimisation. It is also significant to note that this is done by means of an undifferentiated overlapping of mythical and 'real' aspects: there is a careful consideration of kinship and genealogy in order to trace the passage of knowledge and legitimacy over time; but this can only be done with the sanction of mythical foundations and supernatural events.

This is not to be dismissed as 'pure discourse', since discourse is inherently active and practical - it has effects in 'real' life. During fieldwork, I was lucky to witness the choice of the 'History of the Terreiro Tombency' as the main theme for Dilazenze's Carnival performance. First of all, this may have had to do with the fact that the terreiro had been inactive for some years regarding public rituals, thus

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<sup>6</sup> Based on a document produced, at Dilazenze's request, by Brazilian anthropologist Ana Cláudia Cruz da Silva, who was also doing research with the Block.

<sup>7</sup> It is not 'just language'. Brothers and sisters 'of saint' should not marry and their carnal mothers should not initiate sons and daughters.

Dilazenze taking in charge the maintenance of its importance. More important than that, however, is the fact that it is commonly accepted that a Block which is rooted in a terreiro will have more power and success. In conversation with most people, this involved a twofold consideration: on the one hand it meant that the spiritual power and energy emanating from the religious activities would positively contaminate the Block's activities; on the other, it meant that the Block could use the networks of blood kin, *santo* kin and neighbourhood that the terreiro allows for.

This can only be so because of Candomblé's characteristics. A terreiro can be opened by anyone who has been initiated completely into Candomblé. Initiation in this sense is a long process, from a first stage attained after 7 years to a final one after 21 years. The process of initiation is done under the direct tutelage of the *mãe* or *pai de santo*. These are not exactly priests or priestesses, but rather 'keepers' of the saints, i.e., good administrators of the relationship between two worlds that were severed in mythical times - that of the orixás and that of humans - which must be reunited through ritual (whether public, during which the orixás can take possession of the initiates' bodies, or, more commonly, through the offerings given by the initiate to his or her guiding orixás). Several important relationships are established through *santo* kinship: between any *mãe* or *pai de santo* and his or her *mãe* or *pai de santo*; between he or she and his or her co-initiates; between he or she and his or her *filhos* and *filhas de santo*; and, to close the circle, amongst these. Since there is no established church or bureaucracy, terreiros are autonomous and tend to aggregate consanguine relatives, affinal relatives and neighbours, thus becoming the loci for group solidarity and mutual help. The *santo* kinship between terreiros further allows for ties across geographical distance.

But most importantly, terreiros developed, according to local theory, as the loci for two important functions: the keeping of a 'memory of Africa' (where the orixás reside and whereto the dead go), and the resistance to slavery and marginalization. This is where the tropes of 'roots' and 'resistance' cross with those of 'kinship', sanctioned by what we would call 'the sacred' (but which, in Candomblé, as a practical, 'magical' religion, goes beyond that, acquiring the facet of a very practical administration of everyday life, its hazards and outcomes). 'Race' or 'being black' is the ambiguous term that the wider society has historically used to name this complex web of relationships.

This potent 'social motor' is now, in the contemporary context, the springboard for the public demonstration of black expressive culture, as well as social and political mobilisation. Stuart Hall says that there is a clear development in Black identity politics from 'a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself' (1992:253), a formative, not merely an expressive phenomenon, meaning that the reversal of negative stereotypes about blackness is giving place to a creation of self-representations. The two 'stages' are not separate, of course. And in the Brazilian case they seem to go hand in hand. Dilazenze engages not only in the creation of music and choreographs for Carnival and shows. It also has a dance group that is engaged in stylising Candomblé dances and showing them in the local dance circuit. They also engage in neighbourhood social work. The driving motto is *conscientização*, that is, consciousness-raising. By this they mean generating pride in being Black by means of developing and showing the richness of Black expressive culture. But this consciousness involves recognition of the social inequalities of Brazilian society that help conflate race with class.

#### 'INSTRUMENTAL PRIMORDIALISM'

I said before that in the Brazilian racial formation, the praise for miscegenation contains an understatement about whitening: miscegenation would be the process through which the population would ideally become 'racially' whiter and admittedly blacker in cultural expression. This not only reifies notions of races as separate populations (waiting to be mingled), but also reifies definitions of Black culture as merely expressive, sensorial or based on bodily performances (which, in the western Cartesian scheme, amounts to an inferior position). Underlying this is the persistence and resilience of 'race' as a natural category separated from 'culture' - an outcome of the project of national identity building that sponsored the national myth of 'racial democracy'.

Parallel to this, the last decades have witnessed the emergence of a more politicised discourse (from social movements and social scientists) denouncing the hoax of 'racial democracy' and showing that racism in Brazil has covert characteristics. In many instances both opinion makers and activists are inclined towards 'strategic essentialism' (Gilroy 1995 (1993)), reasserting 'race'. Appraisals of

'hybridism' do not seem to be very welcome in nowadays Brazil, since they tend to elide power and inequality lines and resonate of Freyre's ideas.

Now, the growth of a Black cultural movement has centred on making public Black expressive culture as Black (and no longer as an example of Brazilian syncretism). Candomblé is increasingly portrayed by Black activists as of African origin, and an Yoruba Nation-based orthodoxy is emerging, especially in Salvador, with the eviction of Catholic saints from the terreiros; similar events are taking place with capoeira and with music. It seems that we are facing a pendulum situation, in which certain cultural expressions have to be portrayed as Brazilian in order to be accepted but only to be, on another pendulum position, claimed as specifically Black.

What seems to be happening is the emergence of that which we, anthropologists, would call 'ethnicity', covering a span of senses of belonging and difference: a sense of place of origin (Africa); a sense of history and places of destination (the Diaspora, the Black Atlantic); a sense of common trajectory based on a common ordeal and reaction to it (slavery, resistance); a sense of genealogy, kinship and family; a sense of specific skills to which one can claim authority (expressive culture); and a sense of common world-views (religion) that, in this case, also supplies a structure of fictive kinship, historical continuity and mythical foundations.

Stuart Hall claims that ethnicity allows for the recognition of the construction of race, and that in many contexts we can witness notions of difference being replaced by what he calls (using Derrida's notion) *differance*: positional, conjunctural, conditional lines of identity and difference. My informants' uneasy balance between what is and is not 'Brazilian', 'Afro-Brazilian', 'Black' or 'African' seems to point on this direction (Hall 1992:257). In this sense, the members of the 'Afro-Cultural' groups are more in tune with these developments than the members of the Black political movement<sup>8</sup>.

The people I did research with clearly use a primordialist idiom, in accordance with commonsensical notions of kinship and genealogy. This claim to a non-chosen identity, however, is not necessarily based on the same classificatory assumptions that

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<sup>8</sup> It is out of the scope of this paper to go into the details of this discussion. But I can say that the sense of being 'inside' kinship lines, *santo* kinship networks, and neighbourhoods, provides my informants with a sense of belonging (of semantically extending 'kinship') that is closer to our notions of ethnicity than to the political movement's recovery of 'race'. One could ironically say that pre-modern references and modes meet the post-modern ones, leaving aside the modern...

served to define a 'race'. It is much more similar to notions of extended kinship as the basis for ethnic belonging. Since they are not an immigrant group, or an ethnic group competing with others for a territory, and since the memory of slavery and their incorporation (albeit as subalterns) in the citizenry of the Brazilian nation-state after abolition is part of a sense of collective identity, they are more rather like an ethnic group on the making - subaltern Brazilians with a growing sense of attachment to a Diaspora. This can not, however, set aside the very basic fact that cultural expression is being used – *instrumentally* - as currency for access to citizenship: an ethnic allegiance can very well be a resource for becoming seen and heard when all the capital available is symbolic capital.

I have tried to follow Wade's advice that 'racial and ethnic identities must be seen in a national and global context, as shifting, decentred, relational constructions, subject to a politics of identity, culture and difference that encompasses [many levels of social identification and many] cultural expressions' (1997:108). In times of ethnic resurgence, the proliferation of 'authenticities' as well as 'hybrids' and 'new ethnicities', and the politico-economic relevance of 'Culture', the people I did research with use some of the so-called primordial ties (namely kinship) and their primordialist discourse to bargain - instrumentally - in the public arena. But what they use the most are 'false' primordial ties ('race') and constructed ties that emulate 'primordial' ones (e.g. *santo* kinship). In another situation many of them could (as they have done in the past and as many still do) join a Christian religion, refuse to take part in the Afro Blocks, engage in 'racial' hypergamy and many other strategies contrary to primordial ties. The irony is that those who would do so, we the observers would no longer call Blacks<sup>9</sup>.

## POSTSCRIPT

After having written this paper, I was discussing my doubts with a colleague over the phone. She thought that some of the ideas were reminiscent of those so brilliantly put forth by John Comaroff (1987). As a matter of fact, if one puts aside Brazilian exceptionalism (although not Brazilian specificities) as an ideological construct, the

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<sup>9</sup> This paper focuses a very specific issue, and a considerable amount of ethnographic material would be needed to support all the arguments put forth. A book which includes a considerable amount of

emergence of a Black movement in Ilhéus resonates Comaroff's analysis. The author starts by asking whether the roots of ethnicity '...lie in so-called primordial consciousness or in a reaction to particular historical circumstances...' (1987:302). His five propositions (which I will not repeat here) are meant to show that ethnic ascription is juxtaposed to class differences, but that they still have (or gain) a life of their own, presenting themselves to lived experience as primordial ties. Blackness in Brazil is seen, in common sense terms, as the cause for class inequality and, therefore, as a primordial identification resource which can be mobilized for collective action and socio-political claims. Class mobility is seen as a feasible outcome of individual effort, through reproductive strategies that allow for escaping the diacritical signs of ethnic/race identification. However, the more politicised segments of the Black movement do present to their audience a class analysis, while accepting the mobilizing function of cultural identification, provided that this cultural identification is built upon a historical consciousness of the experience of slavery and the ensuing economic marginalisation. It is historical class formation justified by racial essentialism and naturalisation. The latter have become the grounds for group reproduction and identification, passing on cultural materials via social relationships that are then read as primordial - by both natives and observers.

Comaroff says that '...in as much as ethnic affiliations are realized and solidify into status groups by virtue of such historical processes, they have precisely the opposite trajectory to that theorized by Weber. In the Weberian tradition, affinities based on status, being primordial, ought to come before those based on class...' (1987:318). But, he goes on to say, '...it is not only Weber who is turned on his head by the rise and persistence of ethnic groupings. In classical Marxian terms too, ethnicity should not appear with the emergence of class differences' (1987:318). And he concludes: 'However, far from disappearing, or remaining a mere epiphenomenon of 'real' antinomies, ethnic identity assumes an important role in the dynamics of many historical systems - sustaining yet masking, reinforcing yet refracting, their dominant lines of cleavage' (1987:318).

This is very close to what I believe the people I've worked with are doing: they make certain social relations primordial, deriving from this strength for acting in a

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materials and reflections on my fieldwork in Ilhéus was published in 2000: Vale de Almeida, M., *Um Mar da Cor da Terra: Raça, Cultura e Política da Identidade*. Oeiras: Celta



social formation in which race and class are blurred and in which access to citizenship is increasingly codified (globally, and most of all in the increasingly hegemonic U.S. tradition) along ethnic and 'para-ethnic' identity lines. The outcome may very well be the reproduction of their identification (by the dominant) as subaltern blacks/poor. But they are playing the rules of the game.

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‘INSTRUMENTAL PRIMORDIALISM’?  
THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AMONG  
A BLACK CULTURAL GROUP IN A TOWN OF BAHIA, BRAZIL

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*Abstract*

In the town of Ilhéus (state of Bahia, Brazil), the local movement for black or Afro-Brazilian rights is organized on a twofold manner. On the one hand as a political movement, connected with the nationwide Black and anti-racist movement. On the other hand as a cultural movement, locally known as Afro-Cultural. I focus on the latter, especially on the Afro Block ‘Dilazenze’. Members of Dilazenze’s dance, music, and carnival groups are also members of a network of kin who live in a poor neighborhood of town. The central character of this network is also the head priestess of an Afro-Brazilian religious group. The paper discusses how idioms that can be identified as primordialist (kinship, geographical origins in Africa, religion and so on) are instrumentally mobilized for the strategies of empowerment within the local politics and on how they dialogue with local elite’s strategy for recovering the economy through tourism and the commodification of cultural authenticity. The instrumental mobilization of primordialist ties is seen as a correlate of what some authors (namely Gilroy) have called ‘strategic essentialism’ and is in tune with the culturalist notions that are prevalent in the Brazilian racial formation.